

Hunters and Rebels

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Summary: The Winchester brothers find themselves in a broken, desolate world where a multidimensional empire has enslaved the human race. As they learn more about their unfamiliar surroundings, they discover the gravity of the situation. Rated T for coarse language and depiction of Headcrab Zombies. Fun, fun!

1. Bitter Awakening

Morning? â€|Was it that time already?

For Dean Winchester, mornings tended to be awfully redundant. He'd often find himself waking in the early hours of dawn; usually in a motel room. In some cases, he would wake up groggily sitting next to his brother in the good old '67 Chevy Impala as they drove towards another case. It was a repetitive cycle of strenuous daybreaks, day after day.

This time, however, wellâ€| This was completely different.

Dean was welcomed to his new surroundings by a chill Autumn breeze and the lingering scent of smoke. With the fumes brought a smell that was altogether quite vulgar; burnt flesh immediately coming to mind, among other scorched debris. It almost bore a resemblance to the scent of salting and burning the corpses of pissed off ghosts. The man felt a throbbing headache; something perhaps relatable to getting a swift blow to the head by any unspecified heavy object. In short, his head hurt like hell.

Still in a dazed feeling as he tried to cope with the slight migraine he had somehow acquired, the man found himself barely sitting up as he witnessed the world around him.

Nope, this definitely wasn't the cheap motel he'd checked into the previous night.

What a sight to see. Burning buildings, broken glass, a thick layer of ash coating practically everythingâ€¦ The whole damn place was covered in ashes! Almost as if the town had battled against the Apocalypse and had hopelessly failed.

As a matter of fact, it appeared as if the Apocalypse had already happened; and only for Dean to miss out on everything entirely!

Was this some kind of sick joke? Some blatant warning from one of the dickish angels? Did they _really need_ to go so far as to continue convincing him to be Michael's vessel?

In some fit of rage, Dean called out. For Sam, Castiel, Bobby, anyone! Where the hell was everyone? They couldn't be dead. He wouldn't let himself believe it for a second.

Minutes passed with abrupt silence. No response.

The only answer the man received was the fierce howling of wind, followed by more ashes raining from above, which fell like snowflakes onto his chilled jacket. Just face it, Dean. You're alone. There's no Sam. There's no Castiel, no Bobby, nobody. Just Dean.

Not even any remnants of life in this wasteland of a city. Out of what looked like miles and miles of ash and decay, still no one.

What happened next was something Dean couldn't have possibly prepared himself for. Booming footsteps could be heard in the distance, gradually drawing closer to him. These weren't the footsteps of a human, either. Without a moment's hesitation, Dean swiftly checked his pockets. All of them, too. Again, to no real surprise, nothing. Not a single gun, dagger, or even a switchblade. He couldn't defend himself by sitting there without a single weapon.

Keep it together, Dean. Would Dad have wanted you to be a coward like this? No way, he wouldn't have. You've got this, Dean. You've gotâ€¦|_

Thoughts were interrupted by a massive contraption approaching the man. Standing nearly eight or nine feet tall, the complex collection of gears and wires approached him, its single red eye glowing fiercely. Its head arched towards Dean, gazing into him for a long few seconds before unexpectedly lifting the man from the ground.

"Woah, woah!" Dean exclaimed as he watched the ground blur under him.

The hefty robotic creature began to dash away from the scene, tightly grasping the man's body in the same manner one would carry a sack of potatoes.

"Oh, you have _got_ to be goddamn kidding me!"

Yet, struggle(and complain) as he might, there was no humanly way of escaping the bot's clutches.

Well, Dean, you really screwed up this time.

****[Author's note; ****

****A short first chapter indeed! Bear in mind this is the first fanfiction I've written. Future chapters will be lengthier! This fanfiction will rotate from different characters' (Third person limited) point of view. ****

****Furthermore, this fanfiction takes place during Season 5 of Supernatural, as I am still currently watching it for the first time. The setting of this story being after the events of Half-Life 2: Episode Two.]_

2. Encountering an Outsider

Step after step, the two members of the Resistance made their way across the scattered, ashen ruins. The barren remains of the European city had been void of all life ever since the destruction of the Citadel's Dark Energy Reactor. What remained of the calamity was in shambles; debris everywhere, making navigating the area rather difficult.

It was hard to believe that it had only been a day prior when Gordon Freeman had received orders to scour the city. He could remember clearly Kleiner's uneasy voice; the older man urging him to search for any survivors of the impact. In hindsight, Gordon could understand the sympathy the elder scientist felt for the City's inhabitants. It only natural to feel empathy towards other humans. Yet, Freeman only had difficulty believing there was anyone alive but himself and his companion.

Walking by Freeman's side was none other than Alyx Vance. The young woman was a tinkering mechanic, skilled hacker, and an overall compassionate and caring person. Her father had worked with Dr. Freeman years ago in the Black Mesa Research Facility. In spite of the fact that Gordon and Alyx had only known each other for nearly a month at the time, he could not help but admire her perseverance. The passionate young woman proved herself an excellent partner, both on the battlefield and during times of leisurely activities. Had Gordon ever a chance to speak his mind, he would perhaps have given sincere compliments to his companion. Now was not the time for that, however.

It had been about an hour of searching, perhaps even longer. Neither Gordon or Alyx were able to find anything or anyone out of the ordinary; not a glimpse of life other than themselves. What struck Gordon as odd was when the third member of the search party, Dã~G, had suddenly took off, leaving the two travelers in the dust.

Dã~G was an interesting fellow. Quite a character he had, too. If one could describe the massive robot as a "he". Built by Alyx's father, the eight-foot tall robot was designed to protect her. Her and Dã~G had apparently been an inseparable duo ever since she was a young girl. Gordon hadn't too much knowledge on Dã~G himself, however. All he knew was what Alyx told him about, as he never quite bothered to ask her about it. Being skilled in all sorts of mechanics, the woman had apparently added onto her robotic friend until he stood high as a giant.

What was peculiar to Gordon, however, was why the hound had taken off all of the sudden. Apparently, this behavior had also bewildered Alyx as well; she shot Gordon a confused glance before making a lighthearted remark towards the artificial canine.

"Well, there he goes! Wonder what DÃ~G's gotten into."

Alyx paused for a moment, a surprised look arriving on her facial expression as if she had realized something or perhaps gotten an idea.

"Do you think he might have found something?"

Gordon raised an eyebrow, looking at his female friend with equal curiosity. In honesty, he was frankly quite surprised as well. He hadn't quite expected to actually _find _anything in the vicinity.

Alyx began making her way towards the direction that DÃ~G had taken off; Gordon following close behind the woman as he kept a firm grip on his Zero Point Energy Field Manipulator.

In the far distance, a voice could be heard. A holler, as one might call it, one of an audibly masculine voice. So there was someone out there?

Well, that was to assume that it wasn't a zombie using vulgar words in a fit of rage. Heâ€| supposed that could have been possible, but that theory in itself seemed rather unlikely. Zombies typically didn't sound identical that.

Within mere seconds of hearing the unfamiliar of distress, DÃ~G came bounding back to his human friends. This time, however, when he returned, circumstances were quite different. In fact, he had returned with a friend of his own. After coming to a quick halt, DÃ~G let out a distinct beeping noise, presenting what he had found to his master.

"Hey, DÃ~G! I see you found yourself a friend?"

Just as Alyx had said, wellâ€| DÃ~G had definitely found himself a friend, for better or for worse. A young man, presumably in his late twenties, wearing a leather jacket of some sort. Not the typical attire anyone of the Resistance _or _Combine would wear.

It could also be noted that this unfamiliar man was highly agitated. The look on his face alone was clear enough that this man wanted nothing to do with this tomfoolery.

After letting out an irate groan, the stranger replied to Alyx's indirect question.

"I take it this _THING_ belongs to you?"

The newcomer's harsh reaction lead Gordon to wonder if he was dealing with someone hostile. Yet, when he glanced over to Alyx, she appeared to be calm as ever. Maybe she was right to feel like such. Maybe this leather-jacketed fellow was only a complainer, so to speak.

"I take it you two have already gotten acquainted with each other."

Alyx's tone of voice was one of sarcasm as she spoke.

Clearly fed up with the shenanigans, the stranger rolled his eyes and gave an equally sarcastic response in return.

"Yeah, we're _best friends_. Now could you get this massive heap of metal to let go of me?"

Alyx kept a grin on her face, however, she did immediately turn to Gordon, motioning to the stranger who was still confined in the grasp in DÃ~G's large 'arms'.

"What do you say, Gordon? Do you think we should trust this guy?"

Thatâ€| That was an awfully good question. Gordon did not even know how to respond to such a question. The newcomer didn't appear to be too much of a threat, although one could never be _too _careful. There was always a chance that he could be affiliated with the Combine, perhaps working undercover or something of the sort.

Gordon shrugged his shoulders in response to Alyx's inquiries.

"You heard him, DÃ~G. You can let him down now."

Alyx spoke to her friend in a way that someone might speak to an actual dog; authoritative and firm, yet kind and trusting. It was quite obvious that the two had formed a stable relationship. It was a rather interesting concept, too; the friendship between human and android.

Sure enough, at Alyx's commands were heard, DÃ~G placed the man onto the ground, or dropped him, rather. The jacketed man fell on his feet with a thud, stirring up the dusty particles beneath him.

"So, does that _"dog"_ of yours do this crap all of the time? Justâ€| kidnapping people without their permission?"

Alyx shook her head, appearing to be somewhat embarrassed by DÃ~G's erratic behavior.

"Can't say he's ever done that before, actually." Alyx exchanged glances with the artificial intelligence, his head lowering into a slump as a low, mechanical whine escaped him.

"He's just weary of strangers, that's all."

DÃ~G wandered back to Alyx's side after getting a good glance at the grumpy individual. There was no bound to that creature's curiosity; artificially intelligent or not. The robot appeared to show curiosity for the man, as did the other two rebels. In fact, the question might even be simultaneous throughout all three of the rebels' minds:

Who is that?

"Follow up if I may, what happened to this place?" the man asked, an incredulous expression on his face.

â€| Things _were_ getting progressively peculiar. At least, they were in Gordon's silent opinion. Almost everyone had known of City 17. The

place had been Combine's main base of operations for years now. Anyone who had been alive for the past twenty years seemed to know about the dangerous city. It was infamous for being home to the Citadel, as well as being located perilously close to the high-security prison of Nova Prospekt. For someone to know nothing of City 17â€¦ That was almost completely unheard of in itself!

After a short pause, Alyx began to explain,

"You're in City 17, or what's left of City 17, to put it more accurately. I take it you're not from around here, hm?"

"You have no idea."

"By the way," the woman responded, "My name is Alyx Vance. The gentleman accompanying me is Gordon, andâ€¦ I see you've already met Dã~G."

Dã~G made a silly, cheerful dancing motion at the mention of his name.

As the woman looked back to the disgruntled stranger, her expression softened.

"And you areâ€¦?"

Some hesitation, and then, a response.

"â€¦Dean. The name's Dean."

3. Little Brother

Being the little brother was never easy. Looking up to your older sibling only to receive no trust in return. Lately, it seemed as if the whole world was up against him, while Hell tried to manipulate them onto their side. It was nothing short of overbearing, and though his older brother cared much for him, the lack of trust certainly didn't improve anything. In fact, everything seemed to gradually become worse. People only saw the younger brother as a freak; a demon blood-drinking monster who couldn't make decisions for himself.

Life for Sam Winchester just wasn't easy. Sure, he enjoyed saving people during hunting cases. The amount of lives Sam and his brother had already saved was uncountably high. Yet, the bad seemed to outnumber the good. He had lost practically everything dear to him. His girlfriend, his parents, his friendsâ€¦ It was at the point where he was afraid to love someone in fear that they would be lost. Dean seemed to direct most, if not all of his attention to Castiel. Ruby turned out to be a deceitful liar. Bobbyâ€¦ He definitely wasn't in any condition to hunt anymore.

Now, it was just Sam, alone in a desolateâ€¦ swamp?

It took a moment for Sam to gather his bearings. The younger Winchester couldn't exactly recall where he was prior to this situation, now that he thought of it. Just dark, imperceptible memories that seemed to fade away the more he took in his surroundings.

Trudging through the murky, cold water, the male got a feeling that something atrocious had taken place in the area. Somethingâ€¦
Apocalyptic. Scattered around him were some odd type of shells; much similar to that of bombs. The whole feeling that everything brought gave him a sense of dread. What happened here? Not a single person in sight; not even a demon or a ghost lingering nearby. Usually there was someone, _something_, even.

â€¦Nothing. No one.

It was silent, save for the muted howling of the wind which brought with it a scattered rain of ash. What could have caused this? After looking around and examining his surroundings, he saw nothing but murky water, smoke, ashesâ€¦ The whole place was practically dead.

Then, a cry.

"_HELP, OH GODâ€¦ HELP ME!_"

An agonizing scream, distant at first, growing in a rapid pace. It sobbed, howled, bellowed.

Someone was alive out there! It wasn't too late to help someone, to set things at least a little right! Maybe they would have some information about what had happened! He could only hope that none of this was either his or Lucifer's fault.

Facing the direction of the cry for help, Sam took off. This would be just as any hunting trip. Nothing out of the ordinary, just hunting. Sam had done this on his own before. He may have been the little brother, but he could handle things just as well as Dean, if not better. Orâ€¦ So he hoped.

Heart racing, pace slowing, the man's running came to a halt. The voice, still sobbing, was noticeably louder. He had to be close, he wasn't going to let anyone get killed, he swore to himself. As much as he dreaded his job, he had to do it. Family business, right?

Sam checked for his weaponry. Not a single gun, knife, or lighter. Now, of all times, he had to lose his weapons. Of course.

Looking around for a makeshift weapon, Sam managed to scavenge a metal construction pipe that lied upon the decaying ground. He held it firmly in his hands, despite being uncertain if the pipe would suffice.

Sam then saw what he was up against, and oh, was it a sight to behold.

A figure, presumably an adult male, stood there in the open. His hands were horridly disfigured into something of claws; their bony indexes reaching out into slender talons. The creature's stomach was gruesomely ripped open as fresh blood seeped out of it, ribcages deformed into sharp teeth. Entrails were visible, exposed into fresh air with a vivid crimson hue to them as they pulsated rhythmically in a sort of horrifying display. Atop the poor victim's head was a large parasite-type creature that quivered ever so slightly as it dug deep into the shoulders of the victim. Muffled, gurgling sobs came from underneath the monstrous parasite's clutches as it turned to face

towards Sam.

“That was a person. Under that horrendous, grotesque distortion of blood and parasites, there was a person; a human being, and they were screeching in agony for _help_.

Sam didn't know what to say. There were no possible words to even _begin_ describing what he was seeing. He was shocked, appalled, even; at a complete loss for words. Yet, driven by the fact that this—this _thing_ was still, in fact, human.

"_Sir, I—_ hold still, I can help you!"

Words stifled out of his mouth before he could even imagine what to do. Eyes glanced back to the lead pipe that he still held in his hand. He was panicking; even after seeing everything that he had witnessed throughout being a hunter. This sight just topped all, a well-balanced mixture between horrendous and forlorn.

Mere seconds after the monstrosity had turned towards the man, it began to walk. Sauntering along in a lifeless stupor, it shakily brought up its arms before it. Elongated indexes rose from previously clenched fists. A harrowing howl escaped its throat as its pace picked up, staggering towards the hunter.

Stay calm, Sam. You've got this. You've hunted all kinds of things before. You've pulled demons right out of people. You've saved hundreds, maybe even thousands of lives; you can handle saving this one person.

The younger Winchester cautiously approached the victim as it continued to sob and flail about. Yet, as he approached the other, it also continued towards him. It began running towards the man. The biggest issue was that Sam mistook this beast's actions for reaching for help.

His attitude quickly changed when it placed sharp talons onto both of his shoulders, digging into his flesh. He let out an exclamation of pain and shock as razor-sharp fingernails were driven into him. Already, the man was becoming overwhelmed! Everything was happening so unbearably instantaneous. Before he even had time to ponder, Sam swung the rusted, lead pipe into the fleshy body of the parasite. The creature began to falter as it was pushed back, swinging side to side. Even so, after no less than five seconds, it got back on its feet, more aggressive than beforehand. It bolted towards the one who had attacked it, not deterred by a thing in the world.

In a state of shock, the male took another swing at the parasitic form. After another swift strike in the head, the inhuman form toppled onto the ground. High screeching turned to low, unintelligible gurgles as blood seeped from underneath the formation on its head. A mixture between scarlet red and mustard yellow was dripping from the creature as it finally ceased movement.

For a moment, all Sam could do was stare. Stare at the creature that he had just put out of its misery. He was completely bewildered; what _was_ that thing? Not even in the earlier days of hunting had he seen anything like this. It bore no resemblance to what he had witnessed when flipping through the pages of his father's journal. Furthermore, its behavior almost reminded him of someone infected with the

Croatoan virus, although, he had never seen a crustacean-like creature attached to the victim's head like thatâ€¦ It was indescribably perturbing.

He had questions. So many questions; so little answers. Seeing as he was, in fact, Sam Winchester, however, he knew how to find answers. Investigate, research, and search for information. Therefore, this was what he did. The brother took steps, hiking through the rubble and destruction. The ground trembled ever so slightly beneath him as he dragged himself to higher grounds. In spite of the fact that he thought he was making the journey alone, there seemed to beâ€¦ an inhuman presence around him. Something definitely wasn't right, and he felt as if the worst was yet to come.

Noises were heard behind him as he walked, makeshift weapon still in hand. More noises similar to what were heard earlier. Whimpers, sobs, howls; all simultaneously chiming in harmony. A grim chorus full of heavyhearted husks, singing a requiem of desolation. The members of the choir were restless, hostile, and wretched. They mourned, yet hungered for bloodshed. It was strange, how their erratic behavior almost reminded him of his own behavior in the past. He could not help but feel sorry for the creatures, whatever they happened to be.

You have to keep going, Sam. Don't let this get to your head.

The words silently flew through his mind like a shower of bullets. It was all very true; he had to keep going. What was important was that he survived. Reality or a dream, he was not sure, but he got the sneaking suspicion that survival was more than important: It was _mandatory_.

Sounds crept up behind the man; shuffling, running, growling, gurglingâ€¦ They were drawing closer by the second. He could hear their voices behind them, snarling and bawling. As the alien creatures approached him, Sam knew that he had to fight. This time, there was no running. There was no avoiding, or evading, or hiding.

He was going to do whatever necessary to survive this nightmare.

4. Reunion

"Let me get this straight. The whole world has gone to hell because of _aliens_?"

As the group walked through the ruined wasteland, the strange woman had explained it all. Dean couldn't believe what he'd heard. Sure, the hunter had killed numerous demons, vampires, shape-shifters, you name it! Butâ€¦ _Aliens?_ Now, come on, that was a little _too_ much. There had to be a better explanation than that. Maybe some hysteria caused by War or the other horsemen was making people believe that aliens were the problem? He just couldn't bring himself to believe that aliens, of all things, had taken over the planet.

"If _that's_ how you want to put it, then, yes. I'm not sure how else you want me to word it." The woman who wore a headband now gave Dean a hesitant smile.

She was also looking pretty doubtful, however, her doubt probably stemmed from different reasons than his. Maybe she was telling the truth. Hell, she was probably wondering why he was so doubtful of her claims. Maybe this was how it felt to be a victim of an angry spirit or a monster, not believing a single thing the hunters say when reaching out to help. That was kind of ironic.

"So, little stubby green men took over the planet and slow-danced with everyone?"

Dean asked jokingly, his question in reference to a previous case he had dealt with.

Ah, the simple times when he and Sam thought Gabriel was an actual trickster. Good, good times. Dean could not help but yearn a little for those old days.

Alyx snickered, "Believe me, I wish that all they wanted to do was waltz."

The female's tone grew more somber after her remark.

"The Combine isn't just some gang of alien invaders, I'm afraidâ€¦ They're much more than that. A multidimensional empire, they've had Earth on lockdown forâ€¦"

Her sentence trailed off as she looked down to the ground, hesitating for a moment.

"â€¦As long as I can remember, actually."

Alyx let out a sigh, shaking her head in dismay. That quiet space-man guyâ€¦ Gordon, was it? The guy was also looking pretty bummed about the whole topic. It seemed to be a kind of 'hush-hush' kind of thing. A touchy subject, per se.

Funny how Dean had known a guy named Gordon before. Gordonâ€¦ Walker, something or other. God damn, did he hate that guy's guts. Both him and his brother did, in fact. This guy didn't appear to have anything in common with that Gordon he had known in the past. He wasâ€¦ kind of strange, actually.

A nervous, unsettled look was present upon this Gordon's face as he awkwardly attempted to console the woman. It was reasonably clear that the two were very close to each other. Probably lovers or something corny like that. Not that their relationship was any of Dean's business, either way.

Before Dean could respond to the statement, Alyx began to speak again.

"Well, anywaysâ€¦" She changed the subject, "Dean, right? Where are you from?"

Dean hesitated. That was always kind of a hard question to answer. He didn't have a place to call home. Both him and his brother traveled from town to town, city to city, place to place. They always slept in half-assed motels, varying in quality and prices. Most, if not all of them were half-assed, of course. Even though the hunters' hometown

was Lawrence, Kansas, it didn't seem as if there was a place for either Dean or his brother, Sam, to live. Unless the Impala counted as a home. Speaking of which, what even happened to her? It was a crime to go this long without that sweet, sweet vehicle. If his car was damaged with all of the wreckage, he swore to god that would be the last damn straw.

After a moment's hesitation, Dean responded to the question with improvisation.

"I'm from little bit of everywhere."

It was already too late to think of a clever ruse. He had already spoken his first name, regrettably. At least these people didn't have a clue who he was. Neither of them were acting like they were going to kill him within recognition, so perhaps he was safe for the time being.

"Sounds like a reasonable answer. I just can't believe that we found someone out here! I guess Kleiner's hunches weren't so implausible after all!"

The woman was looking awfully content with herself as she commented on finding him. Was it really that hard to find someone who was still well and alive? Why was she smiling and making light over the fact that everyone here had died? Maybe that was only the tradition of people in this screwed up place? Dean was curious of his new surroundings, yet, at the same time, highly skeptical about everything.

"Speaking of whichâ€¦" Dean lowered his voice, leaning sideways in Alyx's direction, "Your friend over there, is he okay?"

Dean motioned to Gordon, who was still giving him the silent treatment. The man wore a pensive, frustrated expression on his face as he walked alongside the others. Not a single word came out of his mouth in the whole half-hour that Dean had been there; not even a single cough or mumble. Either that guy had some kind of problem with communication, or he was just being a dick for the sheer purpose of being a dick.

"Who, Gordon?" Alyx inquired, glancing at Dean before exchanging glances with Gordon. She wore a confused expression for a few short seconds before repeating the question to her companion.

"You're doing alright, aren't you, Gordon?"

Gordon responded with a faltering nod. Yeah, that was a pretty obvious lie; there was most likely something wrong with him.

It didn't take long for Alyx to catch on and realize what Dean was really asking. The woman chuckled, then returning her gaze to the hunter.

"He's just quiet." Alyx explained, her voice lowering to a soft whisper. "We've both been through a lot in the past few days."

Dean nodded his head slightly when hearing the explanation. Yeah, that was definitely something he could relate to; going through a lot of stressful bullcrap. Lucifer breaking out of hell, orâ€¦ Being let

out_ of hell, more like it. Michael was still continuously being a douchebag about the whole "vessel" nonsense. Then there was Sam, who, unfortunately, still wanted demon blood. Sure, he may not have openly announced it with a big neon sign, but it was pretty evident that his brother was having some kind of huge demonic hangover.

â€|Not to mention that Dean was now stuck in some overcooked city with a mute guy, an overly optimistic lady, and her pet _robot visible-hellhoundâ€| thing_.

"I can understand that." Dean responded, deep in thought about everything that had happened in his own life.

Moments of silence passed as the group continued to walk. Not long ago, Alyx had mentioned leaving the City. Seeing as these people actually knew the way out, he had decided to join them; at least until he could find his way out of this bizarre location. If anyone could help him out of here, it was probably going to be the people who spent their entire lives in this place.

The silence was abruptly interrupted by a distant howling sound; a distress call, ringing throughout the atmosphere. One dissimilar to any hollering he had heard before; a low, bellowing whimper that sounded inhuman. It lasted for seconds, or, at least, resonated through the air smoothly with echoing persistence.

It was pure instinct for Dean to briskly reach into the pocket of his leather jacket and pull out a knife, gun, or any weapon of the sort. He had not even consciously thought of it before he reached into his jacket. Of course, that attempt to find a heroic weapon was completely in vain. _Well, this might suck_.

Feeling a little bit helpless, he looked over to Alyx, who was quick to pull out a pistol. The mechanical 'dog' also drew closer to the group; specifically Alyx. The woman's traveling companion now held a SPAS-12, which the fellow somehow had by his side this whole time. Pulling shotguns and pistols out of nowhere, alright.

Hold on a second.

These peopleâ€| Were they alsoâ€| hunters?

Dean finally spoke up,

"What the hell was _that_?"

Without hesitation, Alyx gave a hasty answer, "Zombies! Something, orâ€| _Someone_ must have riled them all upâ€| I wonder what's going on."

Zombiesâ€| Ah, memories began rushing to Dean's head at the mention of zombies. Memories of an apocalyptic world that the older Winchester had gotten a glimpse of, thanks to those dickhead angels. Oh, he could only hope that Sam was okay in this shiftiest of an apocalypse.

"Zombies? You mean, likeâ€|" the Winchester struggled over his words, "You mean, like, Croatoan virus zombies?"

Alyx paused for a few short seconds, afterward shaking her head in

confusion. She didn't seem to have a clue what he was talking about.

"Oh, these zombies aren't infected by any _virus_." responded the woman, "Parasites, howeverâ€¦ That's a different story."

Dean didn't quite understand what she meant by that, as it sounded like a double negative to him. He was no scientist, though.

Alyx began to speak again as she gave a quick glance in the direction of the eerie bellowing noise, "I say we check this out, it's got to be good. 'Have any guns on you, Dean?"

â€¦

"Uhâ€¦" Dean awkwardly muttered; this was definitely the most emasculating situation ever.

"Notâ€¦ Not exactly, no."

Alyx gave a look at Gordon. Again with the _exchanging glances_. What, did they really expect him to have a gun after waking up in god know's where?

"It's no big deal. Gordon, DÃ~G, and I got your back, right guys?" Alyx grinned at her teammates, Gordon giving another nod in return.

Really strange how that guy could go from nervous weirdo to Mr. serious all of the sudden.

By the woman's side was none other but the giant, s_cary-as-hell dog thing_. If that hunk of scraps could pick up Dean and take him on a kidnapping joyride, what would it do tho zombies? That was a pretty terrifying concept on its own. Not implying that he would _ever_ mention being afraid. Nope, who could blame the guy for being afraid of _Godzilla's lapdog_?

Alyx commanded firmly, "Let's get moving, then."

The three _(assumably)_ hunters took off in the direction of the calling as it intensified. To be fair, however, the newcomer wasn't quite enthusiastic about being the powerless newcomer in the whole situation. It made things kind of awkward; yet, he was driven by curiosity to see what these apparent 'zombies' looked like. _This had better been good_.

Sprinting pace slowing down, the group came to a stopping point. It was very clear that the indistinguishable sobbing noises were originating from this area; or, rather, the area close by. The way Alyx had reacted earlier when hearing those sounds, already jumping to conclusionsâ€¦ Who were the ones crying here anyways, the _zombies_?

"This is where the pity party's coming from, huh?" Dean asked in an attempt to make light of the situation.

"I believe so. How much you want to bet they just got stirred up by a stray raccon?" Alyx responded, also adding some comic relief.

Her somber expression faded back within seconds, however, as something began running towards her direction.

At first glance, he could have sworn it was an officer or a soldier of some sort. Some big-deal military man of some sort, however. As the officer drew closer, there was _definitely_ something off about the guy.

“Mother of God, what was that _thing_ on his head?

A very large, crab-like _thing_ was latched onto the officer's cranium, eating away at the poor dude's life. Whimpering and muffled voices could be heard coming from underneath the parasitic lump on the cop's head; what sounded like raspy radio commands and various unintelligible orders. Oh, and the _stench_. Jesus Christ, the _STENCH_ of that thing!

Appalled and bewildered, Dean pointed towards the thing, about to ask what it even was before getting interrupted altogether.

"Zombine! Get back, he's pulling out a grenade!"

Alyx's harsh voice brought attention to the creature's busy, clawed indexes as it reached for its blood-soaked belt. Surely enough, it was pulling out a grenade. The small explosive glowed a bright, unnoticeable crimson color as the zombified officer held the grenade in the air, right above its head.

Holy shit.

Dean scattered back, tripping over a pile of broken concrete that lay on the lifeless ground below him.

Great job, Dean. Only forty-five minutes into this new world and you're already making a complete idiot of yourself. Plus, you might die. So, that's another wonderful thing to count on.

Bang.

Repetitive gunshots were heard as the zombie officer's head was blown clean off, along with the parasite on top of it. The body fell limp, toppling to the ground as the grenade rolled down, opposite to the survivors' direction.

"Take cover!"

As crazy as the woman sounded when they had met only moments ago, she was now sounding similar to some kind of commander. Of course, it was only plain logic to take cover. Dean immediately threw his hands over his head as he took cover behind more emancipated concrete.

An explosion was heard, echoing throughout the land around it. Zombie parts scattered, and _oh boy,_ did it smell _terrible_.

When he was sure the coast was clear and no more explosions were going to happen, the hunter took a peak at the world around him, sitting up from his spot.

However, what the hunter saw when he looked up was no zombie, but

none other than Alyx's solicitous face, smiling down at him.

"Are you alright down there?" The woman held out her hand, raising an eyebrow in amusement.

Scratching his head, Dean let out a sigh of both relief and alarm. A strange mix of emotions, if any.

"Yepâ€¦ I'm doing just _peachy._" the Winchester retorted sardonically as he was helped up from the ashen floor.

More gunshots could be heard as Dean stood up from his hiding place, and as he watched, the others were just casually mowing down zombies. All types of zombies, too, not just officer ones. 'Regular guy' kind of zombies, zombies with missing limbs, slow zombies, fast zombiesâ€¦ Yet, all of the grotesque creatures had one thing in common; each one of them wore the same parasite upon their face, as if it were controlling their bodies involuntarily. Possessing them, like demons would possess any poor sucker who was unfortunate enough to get in their way.

Minutes passed by, though, they honestly felt like endless hours in Dean's eyes; zombies got taken down by the buck, one, two, three, four, fiveâ€¦ How many of those goddamn things were around there? Things had quickly escalated into some kind of cheesy horror movie; however, this time, it was actually kind of horrible. He was unarmed, and everything reeked like a combination of ass and feet.

Furthermore, it was kind of _really_ strange how the creatures were all swarming in a certain area, however. In the distance, yards away, there was a larger group of zombies. They were all, justâ€¦ Crowding around something, or, as Alyx had stated earlier, _someone_?

It didn't take long for the other two to notice the crowd, either. When Gordon took notice of the group, he gave his partner a tap on the shoulder to get her attention.

"Yes, Gordon? What isâ€¦?"

Her sentence fell short as she fixed her gaze on the group of fleshy mutants. All three of them now saw what Dean had been wordlessly staring at.

A good dozen zombies were packed around someone who was tenaciously fighting them all off.

Dean wasn't at all expecting to see who he was seeing, either. Standing there, in the flesh, was none other than his younger brother, and he was tearing those zombies a new one.

Before the older brother could call out and catch his attention, DÃ~G went parading towards the group.

"Be careful, DÃ~G!" Alyx exclaimed as the artificial canine went dashing towards the horde of parasitic corpses, "There's someone alive over there!"

DÃ~G did not look back in response to her orders; it wasn't apparent if he was even listening or not.

Oh, if that cheeky hellhound of a robot even so much as touches a hair Sam's headâ€|

"_Samâ€|!_"

Without even realizing it, Dean had cried out for his sibling. The older Winchester couldn't help but worry about him. Sam was his little brother, his hunting sidekick, and the older brother had sworn on his life that he'd do whatever means necessary to protect him! Sure, he may not have trusted Sam very much after the demon blood incident, butâ€| If Sam were to get hurtâ€|

Thoughts were interrupted and went blank as corpses literally flew up in the air. DÃ~G practically dropkicked the horde of zombies, scattering the horrifyingly disfigured corpses everywhere. Much like a farm dog clearing away a flock of unruly sheep, the monstrous android cleared away all evidence of a horde even being there.

Dean could easily hear Alyx cheering on her pet robot, along with the continuous sounds of guns firing. All of the sounds went into a blurred haze of unprecedented noise. None of those sounds were important to him, however. He had his own mindset and focus right now. Sam was alive. His little brother was not dead, nor was he hiding; he hadn't left or quit or given up. Sam was alive, and that was all that mattered.

5. Votigaunt Foresight

Wasn't it ever so peculiar to find people in this devastation that was once civilizationâ€| How had they even survived? Food and health-related supplies were so scarce, it didn't seem that anyone could thrive in the smoggy destruction for very long. It didn't make any sense to Gordon; how had they gotten here in the first place? Dean seemed to be unusually confused, even claiming to know nothing about the Combine. In fact, it was almost as if the strange man was from a world entirely different!

Despite this, it was clear that the two strangers were quite inseparable. Already, it was highly apparent that they shared a strong bond.

The man who was once disgruntled and irate was now heading towards the other stranger, all signs of exasperation now depleting with rapid succession.

"Sammy!" he called once more before running to the taller male, stopping abruptly when noticing the vile amounts of viscera from the Headcrab's hosts.

For a moment, Gordon thought for sure that the two outsiders were going to give each other hugs and warm greetings. However, the tall one was definitely covered head-to-toe in zombie remains; there was no denying that. Despite his conspicuous blood-stained outfitting, nevertheless, the stranger appeared equally surprised.

"â€|Dean? Dean, is that you?"

A metal pipe fell from his clutches as the long-haired fellow

acknowledged the other, his face a mixture between shock and confusion.

"Yeah, you'veâ€|" Dean's sentence trailed off as he cracked a smile, motioning at his own face, "You've got a little something on your face there."

Rolling his eyes and letting out a sigh of dismay, the taller male kept his gaze.

"You don't say." he replied, examining his own, bloodstained appearance.

It was for a moment that the two stood there, frozen in an awkward silence. Overall, their interaction was one of astonishment. Although, from the way Dean spoke, it was clear that he was familiar with this stranger. Gordon chose not to ask about it, however. Freeman merely chose to watch and observe, as he always did during social occasions.

Perhaps it was a moment of silence returned from the two Resistance leaders that gave Dean the notion that it was time for him to explain himself, or, rather, the man standing beside him.

"Guys, this is my brother, Sam." Dean stated confidently, resting his arm over his brother's shoulder before grimacing at the blood stains on his clothing.

Ah, siblings. That explained the brotherly tormenting that was taking place. Gordon had never actually experienced sibling rivalry firsthand; however, from other people, he had observed quite easily that familial pairs such as these brothers would occasionally pick on each other. That factor was quite noticeable, if not obvious.

Alyx was the next person to speak up, giving a friendly grin as she approached the brother, holding out her hand.

"It's nice to meet you, Sam. My name's Alyx."

Alyx glanced back to Gordon, then returning her gaze to Sam.

"Don't worry, Gordon and I have been taking good care if your brother." the woman added humorously.

In response, Dean made a displeased face, resulting in Sam giving a lighthearted snicker to his brother's reaction.

"I don't doubt it." Sam responded calmly, giving a smile of his own.

When he had made a remark, Sam paused to examine the world around him. He appeared to be highly bemused at the sight of the ruins of the city. Not an unusual response, either, as anyone who was not used to seeing City 17 in such a state may very well be flummoxed by everything.

Exhaling, Sam slowly shook his head as he spoke once again.

"Excuse me, miss, but do you know what happened here? This place looks terribleâ€|" his voice fell into a hushed tone as he looked

back to the woman.

Alyx let out a sigh of her own before responding.

"Combine. The Combine happened."

Alyx averted her eyes for a few seconds as if thinking of a way to simplify her expression. It was for a moment that she fell silent, evident that she was not fond of explaining the Combines grievous doings.

"It's a pretty long story. There will be more time to explain everything once we get out of the city. Unless you have some business to take care of here, I suggest you join us."

Though Alyx had put her statement somewhat bluntly, the words she spoke were indeed true. If the Combine were to take notice of Gordon and Alyx, it would mean bad news for the whole Resistance. As it was, the group was very easy to scour out in such a decomposed area. There was the lingering possibility that the Combine could seek them out at any moment!

"Uhâ€¦ Sure, I guess so." Sam replied uncomfortably.

That was when Dean then spoke up, giving his brother a firm pat on the back as he grinned over at the others.

"Don't mind Sammy over here, he's just new to this whole thing. Of course we'll join you and get the hell out of here!"

"Great," Alyx replied cheerfully, eager to move out, "Then, it's settled; let's go!"

DÃ~G scampered back to Alyx before she could finish her sentence, much to Sam's unsettlement. Gordon took notice of how both brothers had gotten disturbed by the towering robot's excitable behavior. How interesting it was that anyone would be frightened by such a friendly synthetic creature; Gordon had never shown fear to the companion, in fact, he enjoyed its presence. Countless times, DÃ~G had saved his own life, along with Alyx's, of course. This may have been the reason Gordon was not fearful towards DÃ~G like the two newcomers were.

The team of four began to make their way out of the city, heading towards the outskirts of the ruined civilization. It would not take long for them to leave the area, given nothing would stop them in their tracks. Even though the Combine's powers were seemingly limitless, the demolishing of the Citadel proved to weaken their forces dramatically.

During the journey, it was Alyx who decided to strike up a conversation as she walked amongst the broken pavement.

"What brought you guys to City 17, anyways?" Alyx inquired as she looked over to the brothers, "I can't imagine you're here for the historical value."

Dean began responding to her question almost immediately, "Oh, weâ€¦ We're here to investigate, theâ€¦ The, uhâ€¦" his sentence trailed off, almost as if he did not know what to say.

Sam shot the other a suspicious look before correcting him, "Dean and I were traveling, and we lost our way around. I'm not entirely sure how we got here, either."

Dean shot a dissatisfied scowl at Sam, who, in return, shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly.

"_What?_" Sam spoke to Dean, lowering his voice. "You know it's the truth."

Alyx nodded subtly as she listened to him speak, a thoughtful expression visible on her face. "So, that's what happened?"

Gordon's mind was equally deep in thought as well. How often was it that you encountered someone who knew nothing of how they arrived? Perhaps both Dean and his brother were suffering from Amnesia of a sort. Maybe they had arrived due to some unnatural occurrence within the fabric of space-time itself. There was a plethora of possibilities.

"Well, I can't say I know how you got here. I _do_ know someone who might, though. The guy's an old scientist friend of ours, straight from Black Mesa. He should know what to do." The girl smiled reassuringly.

"Alright," Dean cocked an eyebrow after he listened to the explanation, "Where do we find the guy?"

"Well," Alyx began, "If I'm correct, he should still be hanging around White Forest with the others. It's a long way from here, but there's a good chance that you can get some information there."

Sam exchanged glances with his brother before responding in an uncertain voice, "Sounds like a good plan."

So, that is was. Everyone in the group agreed on the idea to consult doctor Kleiner and the others at White Forest. Traveling to the Resistance base would certainly prove difficult, however, the reward for doing so was beyond valuable. Most hopefully, the journey to White Forest would be easier now that Gordon had learned his way around the area. He certainly wouldn't make any of the mistakes he had made his first time around the forests; that was a definite factor.

As the hours passed, the sun began to hang low in the sky. In spite of the fact that the sky was blanketed by gloomy clouds, it was evident that the night crept closer. A sense of solemnity grew with the dull skies. Roaming the nights would be rather difficult. Even though the Headcrab Zombies were nothing short of atrocious, there was no denying that the other creatures of the night would far surpass the danger of any petty parasitic hosts.

The late evening was dusky, frigid, and unforgiving. Approximately two and a half hours had passed, though Gordon could not accurately calculate this time. Had his Hazardous Environmental (H.E.V) suit a clock, perhaps he would be able to tell what time it was. Regardless, the sun had already set and after such a long time of walking, the silence was interrupted by Dean's aggravated voice.

"Are you _sure_ you're going the right way? The last hour has been

nothing but walking, and I'm pretty sure _Cujo_ here has been eying me the whole time!" the man motioned towards DÃG, who stifled out a soft, synthetic whimper.

"_Dean_," the taller brother's voice was hushed as he nudged Dean's side, "don't be rude."

Alyx raised her index finger as if she were about to comment towards the brothers. However, not a noise escaped her, as something else caught her attention. What caught her attention soon attracted the notice of the others, as well.

Intelligibly perceptible was the sound of voices.

"_Ga la lungâ€|_"

"_Ah ghurrrrâ€|_"

These voices were unmistakably the sound of a Vortigaunt's flux shifting. The Vortigaunts were an extraterrestrial race that had sought refuge within Earth's grounds. Historically, the Vortigaunts had been enslaved by the Combine in a manner very similar to how the Combine enslaved humanity. Not even the Vortigaunts' leader, the Nihilanth, was safe from the Combine's relentless grip. It was only when Freeman released the Vortigaunts from the Nihilanth that they had allied with the humans. Both mankind and Vortigauntkind had formed an alliance with a common interest: Revenge.

Alyx paused when hearing the Vortigaunts foreign speech, glancing in the direction from which she heard the voices. "Did you hear that?"

The tongue of which the Vortigaunts spoke was also heard by the two brothers, Sam being the first to question it.

"Is someone over there?" Sam asked as his walking came to a halt.

"I think so," the female began, "It sounds like there's Vortigaunts nearby."

Both Sam and his brother had shot confused, questioning glances over to the woman as she motioned her hand, beckoning towards what closely resembled firelight. She drew her weapon, a semi-automatic pistol, keeping it close by her. Gordon did not quite understand her defensive actions, but he decided to be defensive as well; because, you knowâ€| She might have a good reason to behave in such a way. You could never be too careful. Though lowered, Gordon still kept hold of his SPAS-12. The other members of the party were simply confused, Sam having long abandoned his weapon.

It was only when the group had found the source of the light that Gordon and Alyx relaxed their weapons. It was rather clear that the group had made great strides, as the visible ruins were lessening. There, amidst the shadows, sat a small camping site, guarded partially by boulders and heavy rubble. In the heart of the camp was a fire. Despite simply being a fire, this luminous entity served a different purpose than the other fires engulfing the city. Whereas those fires had been bound to destruction and decomposition; this fire was smaller, softer, perhaps even peaceful. The small campfire was for warmth and survival, rather than anything negative.

Thriving in this bivouac was three Vortigaunts. One sat on a rock, warming his extraterrestrial hands. Two others were handling what appeared to be the corpses of Headcrabs; they dealt with the slaughtered parasites as butchers would, working together in some sort of provisional butcher shop.

When noticing the presence of Freeman and his accomplices, the sitting Vortigaunt gazed over, four vibrant red eyes full of inquisitiveness. He stood up from his place, slowly walking in a haunched position to the man's direction.

"Aahhhhh" vocalized the Vortigaunt in a raspy voice. "The Freeman and the Alyx Vance have come"

With that, the Vort noticed the other two humans being guided by the rebels, as well as DãG.

Slowly, the creature approached the two brothers, studying them both. "We have also anticipated the arrival of the enigmatic guests."

Dean gave the Vortigaunt a suspicious look in return. "Say _what_ now?"

Without hesitation, the alien creature disregarded Dean's puzzlement.

"We welcome the Freeman and his allies. With pleasure, this one encourages the visitors to take respite in our interim refuge." A two-fingered hand motioned towards the camping site.

Storing her weapon within the confines of her leather jacket, Alyx let a relieved sigh escape her as she gave a sleepy smile.

"You have no idea how much this means to me," Vance remarked, cautiously stepping foot into the Vort's territory, "It feels like we've been walking forever."

"Then it certainly is a greater pleasure to have the Alyx Vance within our presence." responded the Vortigaunt as he made his way back to the 'chairs' station around the campfire. "Sit with us."

In a moment's time, everyone was situated. Well, save for Dean, who stood uncomfortably as he watched the Vortigaunts begrudgingly.

Upon noticing the man's judgmental stare, the alien made himself clear.

"It is unavailing to watch us with such suspicion. We have more in common than one may perceive."

After being called out, the shorter brother's wearily look only grew stronger. "Yeah, whatever you say, Yoda. I don't doubt our _flawless relationship_ at all."

Sam rolled his eyes at Dean's sarcasm, embarrassingly making an excuse for his brother's discourteous actions. "Don't listen to Dean; I think he's just pissed off because he's hungry."

Alyx gave a bit of a chuckle, however, disregarded her own childish behavior after a few brief moments.

"So, what are you three doing out here in the cold? I wasn't thinking we'd meet up out here, even if we _are_ finally getting out of the city." Alyx questioned the extraterrestrial being, an attentive expression visible on her face.

The Vortigaunt blinked, nodding his head subtly before answering the question, "Our arrival serves a higher purpose. While clearly we have foreseen the arrival of the Freeman, it is also true that we have noticed the arrival ofâ€¦" the Vortigaunt trailed off, "_two_ completely unfamiliar entities."

A moment of silence passed as the philosophical creature brought the brothers to attention.

"Deep connections to the Vortessence have lead us to believe that the coming of these two beings will bring about disorder among the barriers, resulting in _gravely_ chaotic events."

"Yeah, and what exactly does _that_ mean?" Dean broke in, all the more weary of the statement.

"To make simple, it means that you and your kindred bear an enormous purpose, one that can not be defined in spoken words." The four-eyed creature looked down at the fire, placidly studying the dancing flames. "In the interim, we suggest you make use of the resources we have available. There shall be ample time for resting in these hours of darkness."

"We appreciate that, sir; both of us do." Sam added politely as if trying to correct his sibling's politeness, or lack thereof.

"I agree," Alyx remarked, "Thank you so much."

Gordon silently nodded his head. As he did not speak, it was seldom that the man expressed his own gratitude. He'd take any opportunity he'd receive to thank others.

Moments later, the Vortigaunt stood up, walking towards the other of his kind. The ever so uncomfortable Dean took advantage of this moment and decided to ask yet another question on his mind.

"So, what exactly are those, thoseâ€¦ alien things?"

"You mean the Vortigaunts?" Alyx tilted her head to the side as she questioned him, getting a nod from her friend in return.

"The Vortigaunts are from the borderworld, Xen. When the Vortigaunts were freed from their tyrannical leader, the Nihilanth, they joined us here on Earth. You can thank Gordon for that."

At the mention of his name, Gordon gave a nervous, awkward facial expression. Yes, thatâ€¦ was quite true. It was him, the Freeman, who had saved the Vortigaunts from their eternal imprisonment. Still, it just seemed to disconcert him when people mentioned his past actions. Back then, Gordon was soâ€¦ inexperienced and terrified for his life, having to fight massive extraterrestrial overlords and such. As fun and fictitious as the concept may seem, it's actually quite

traumatizing.

"Like us humans, the Vortigaunts also want revenge on the Combine. They sided with us after the 7-hour war, proving to be great allies. Not only that, but they possess psychic abilities far stronger than what any human would have."

"Fair enough," the shorter sibling nodded his head, acting as if he was satisfied with the explanation. "I have another question."

"Hm?"

"What the hell is a '_combine_'?"

Oh, what a fun question. Gordon could not help but let a sigh escape him, regardless of how impolite it may have sounded to the others. The Combine, well, however Alyx decided to explain what it was, it was terrible. In fact, Gordon couldn't even list a single thing that was positive about the Combine. Even though propaganda gave the Combine endearing names such as "Our Benefactors", nothing good came out of it.

Of course, Alyx would indubitably do an exceptional job at explaining this; better than Gordon would ever do with an explanation.

Although, for a moment, it seemed that Alyx was not quite as calm as Gordon anticipated her to be.

"As I said earlier, the Combine Overwatch, or Combine for short, is a multidimensional empire. You'll hear about them from the media under names like 'our benefactors'. Don't let the over-glorified name fool you, though. The Combine is bad news, and the things they have done are beyond terrible."

"Do you know what their motives are?" Sam joined the conversation.

"Power, mostly." Alyx frowned, "They've already succeeded in enslaving the human race. That's where we come in."

"_We?_" The shorter-haired sibling repeated.

"Yep. Gordon and I here are part of a Resistance against the Overwatch. Along with many other scientists and rebels, we've been working on a way to get our planet back. Fortunately, we happen to be stationed relatively close to City 17, which just so happened to be the Combine's main station on Earth. Until it got destroyed, of course. As of now, we haven't heard much from the Combine. My guess is that they're probably laying low somewhere in the Arctic regions."

"Excuse me, but how long has the Combine been here? Onâ€¦ On, Earth, I mean."

"Beats the hell out of me." Alyx shrugged, her optimistic attitude had diminished. "Around twenty years, from what I've heard."

Ah, the conversation was beginning to plummet into a solemn, somber

mood. Or, so it felt until the mood was interrupted by the arrival of the Vortigaunt who had earlier greeted the travelers.

In his peculiar-looking hands was a stick; a skewer of sorts. Impaled by the spear was the corpse of a standard Headcrab. Cautiously, the Vort held the stick over the searing flames of the campfire, roasting the parasitic cadaver.

Dean made a face at the slain creature, adding a comment as he watched it cook.

"Isn't that one of those, thoseâ€¦ _Things_ that were stuck to the zombies?" the man pointed out the creature that broiled over the blazing heat.

"Yep, that's a standard Headcrab." Alyx informed him, sounding less than enthusiastic herself, "They're pretty common around here; dangerous, too. You'll want to stay away from them as long as you don't have a weapon."

"Yeah, yeah, I get that butâ€¦ You're going to _eat_ it?"

Overhearing the question, the vortigaunt nodded his hunched head, "It is remarkable how the remains of these parasites have proven to be a sufficient meal."

Sam appeared to be amused at his brother's reaction, though he backed away ever so slightly when the finished cooking was offered to him. Still, it appeared as if he was still trying to be polite.

"Oh, uhâ€¦ Thanks." the taller male had an incredibly uncomfortable look on his face as he accepted the bizarre delicacy.

Dean, on the other hand, had not even an iota of politeness in the situation.

"Ew, godâ€¦ Are you kidding me? I'm not eating that crap."

While it was understandable why no human would want to eat a Headcrab, there was still reason to ingest the ungodly creatures. Though the ravenous alien crustaceans were not pleasant in any way; taste or appearance, they did serve as a nutritional meal. Seeing as food was so scarce in this world, it would only be sensible to accept the repulsive cuisine, even if it _was_ pretty unflattering.

Undeterred, the Vortigaunt spoke his mind, albeit the truth.

"Theâ€¦ _accomplices_ of the Freeman shall accept this sustenance or shall suffer profoundly with undernourishment."

"You heard him, Dean." Sam smirked as the Vortigaunt handed a portion of the food to his brother. "You don't want to starve, do you?"

"Shut up." Dean groaned as he held a piece of the cooked crab, examining it in his hands.

The woman let out a slightly nervous chuckle herself, "At least it's

food, that'sâ€¦ All that matters, right?"

So it was. The group of rebels, and two unsuspecting strangers, had eaten their final courses for the night. It tasted less than satisfactory, and nobody really enjoyed their meal at all. Overall, the flavor was terrible. Even so, as undesirable as it was, it at least ensured the longevity of their lives by a few more days. With high hopes that the next day would prove successful, they all settled down for the night.

6. Unanticipated Interruption

Sparks from the campfire fluttered into the air like a swarm of flaring butterflies. It was the only light within miles, the rest of the ruined civilization blanketed by a thick sheet of blackness. The radiating light from the flames was the only thing that broke the darkness, giving some sense of comfort. Yet, Sam felt no ease. He was not comfortable here, there was no way in hell that he'd relax. At least Dean was sleeping, albeit restlessly. It was a miracle in itself that the older brother could fall asleep in conditions like this. Not even a complaint out of him, eitherâ€¦ Must've been really tired.

In actuality, Sam was the only one awake; save from the strange man in the armor. That guy was anâ€¦ _interesting_ character, to say the least. While it was nothing short of obvious that Alyx could keep a conversation going, her companion there was another story. Something about the guy just seemedâ€¦ Off, in a way.

A chilling breeze swept through the night, a calm howl in the windy air. The night was surprisingly peaceful. Not a word had been spoken since the younger Winchester's attempt to make conversation with the spectacted man. Sam had spoken to Gordon, an awkward hello, only to get no response in return. This was the reason the younger brother had decided to keep to himself.

Even through the howling of the wind, however, an unsettling sound could be heard. A hollow, synthetic, high-pitched bellowing echoed through the air. The noise couldn't possibly be human, no; it sounded too eerie to be natural life.

Sam exchanged glances with Gordon, who sat silently on the opposite side of the fire.

"Gordon, is it?" Sam nervously waved to the other. "Do you hear that?"

It was then that the quiet one wore a baffled look on his face, slowly shaking his head. He ceased movement, however, as the howl was heard a second time. Now it was evident that Gordon heard the sound, as he raised his eyebrows in a look of shock.

Yeah, that can't be good.

Almost immediately, the other tapped Alyx's shoulder, repeatedly before succeeding in nudging her awake.

The woman stirred, groggy and still half asleep. With a sleepy grumble, she drowsily looked up at her male companion.

"Nnnghâ€| Gordonâ€|? What is it?" Alyx murmured as she slowly sat up from the ground, rubbing her eyes.

Gordon glanced right over to Sam, almost as if he was expecting an explanation.

"Umâ€| Yeah," The younger Winchester took a stab at his description, "There's something out there. Are you familiar with any high-pitched howling sounds?"

Alyx hesitated, turning around for a second before returning her confused gaze to Sam.

"â€|Howling sounds?"

Ironically, it was almost immediately after she had asked the question that the howl sounded again, this time considerably louder than before.

An expression almost identical to Gordon's showed up on Alyx's face. She looked undoubtedly shocked and bewildered; it was something Sam recognized in the faces of people he and Dean helped in the past. It was fear.

"Oh my godâ€|" her voice was no louder than a whisper. "There's Hunters nearby."

Sam blinked, running the term over in his head. "â€|Hunters? What do you mean?"

To Sam, the term Hunter had an extraordinarily significant meaning. Though it may be of little importance to anyone in the normal world, hunting was a lifestyle for the two brothers. Bare in mind that hunting did not mean to them anything simple like hunting deer or other sorts of meaningless game. No, to be a hunter was to terminate all of the things that hid in the dark, to kill what everyone thought was fictitious, to save as many lives as possible before the apocalypse hit. To be a hunter was to be a hero, in a way.

This was why the Winchester got confused when hearing of hunters. Certainly, the term must've had a different definition. What else could it mean?

"Combine Hunters," Alyx clarified. "They must be looking for us. We need to get out of here as soon as possible."

She gently tapped the metallic surface of the robot, speaking in a soft, yet stern voice. "Come on, DÃ~G. It's time to get up."

The mechanical creature's eye lit up with alertness before letting out a grumbling noise, similar to that of a growl. It stood up, pounding the ground with its fists. Finishing seconds later, it looked back to Alyx and let out a drawn-out whine.

"So, they're looking for us?" Sam inquired tentatively.

"Like I said, the Combine is no walk in the park. We just recently debunked their super portal, and believe me when I say that they couldn't be more pissed."

"I thought you said they were in the Arctic-" Sam's sentence got cut short as another howl was heard, this time more audible than ever.

Rapid footsteps could be heard now, footsteps from outside the camp. Galloping, something was surrounding them now. Commotion stirred the whole camp, and now everyone was wide awake, save for Sam's brother.

"Dean! Wake up, Dean!"

Sam knelt over, shaking the other male who was sleeping, who, in return, only attempted to push Sam's arms away.

"Get off of me, Sammy. That god damn Headcrab from earlier made me sickâ€¦"

"Dude," Sam shook his head, continuing to prod at his lethargic brother, "You need to get up. _Now_."

In a slumberous stupor, the elder brother stood up, his face ridden with a pouty appearance. "What could be _so important_ that you had to-"

Dean's sentence was interrupted as something hit the ground. It slammed into the dusty floor with a heavy thump, three slender leg-like appendages penetrating the ground.

Two glowing cobalt orbs, one on top of the other, like flashlights gazed at the party. Bizarre eyes scanning the area, the unsettling creature let out a shrill yowl.

Alyx's voice could be heard beneath the high screeches. "Oh, shit! Hunters!"

Already, the once peaceful night had turned into a battlefield.

Thunderous gunshots replaced the earsplitting screeches from the creature as it staggered. The man who was once quiet was now armed with a combat shotgun, the weapon's fire producing more sound than he ever made. Many repetitive shots were fired, shells barely penetrating the sleek carapace of the three-legged brute. Its posture faltered slightly as if it were in pain. Even so, it still remained determined, as if its current actions were the only priority it had.

Right now, it seemed pretty determined to kill that Gordon guy. Likewise, it was probably ready to slaughter everyone in the campsite. If only Sam wasn't so helpless. If only he had the weapons and the knowledge to gank the thing; it would have been just like an average hunting job. This was different, though. Aside from its name and who it was affiliated with, he knew nothing of the creature.

Neither did Dean, as Sam observed in his brother's stunned face. It wasn't common that Dean was afraid of things. He was so charismatic and comfortable with exorcising demons, burning the bodies of pissed off ghosts, and being friends with an_ Angel_. It just feltâ€¦|_

weird_ to see him so freaked out.

The blue-accented savage was nothing but enraged when the shells came in contact with it, it bucked its legs as it began to charge towards Gordon, who, just in time, leaped out of the way. It crashed into the rubble surrounding the campsite, only to get a jolt of smoldering electricity.

Standing there were the alien creatures that had established the shelter. Bursts of electricity could be seen pulsing through and out of their hands, dancing and glistening like tiny lightning storms. Strange foreign utterings were heard from the alien creatures as they attacked the creature, electrocuting it to death within seconds as it let out a piercing growl, toppling to the ground.

"Jesus Christ, what _is_ that thing?!" Dean questioned, his voice shaking.

"â€|A Hunter?" Sam's response was uncertain as he gawked at the now motionless creature.

The older Winchester made a confused, bitchy face, Sam responding with a shrug. He didn't really know what else to say. Alyx was the expert here, not him.

Off in the distance, more calling could be heard, calls similar to the cries of thatâ€| _'Hunter'_.

Alyx grimaced at the sound of the creatures, shaking her head in consternation. She covered her face with her hands, letting out a troubled groan before sitting back down, arms folded. "Welcome to the neighborhood."

So, this was what Gordon and Alyx had to deal with every day? Every single day of their lives was shaped around fighting sinister monsters and traveling from place to place?

â€|_Wow, what a coincidence_.

With a frown, the younger sibling looked his elder, who simply gave another startled, confused look.

Still present were the trio ofâ€| What were they called, again? Vortigaunts?

One of the Vortigaunts neared the woman, his arms no longer surrounded by livid static currents.

He spoke in a low voice, his tone soft, "We sense the approach of more synthetics. They advance in a pack."

Crimson eyes of the Vortigaunt traveled to the siblings.

"It is highly advised that The Alyx Vance and her companions depart from this ground of respite."

Alyx stood up, rather concerned, baffled, even, when hearing the Vort's suggestion.

"You don't expect us to just run, do you?" the woman placed a hand on

her automated friend, "DÃ~G could take those Hunters out in a jiffy."

The Vortigaunt shook his head, momentarily uttering more of that strange language under his breath.

"This one does not believe your associates are prepared to do the same."

Again with the whole 'staring at the Winchesters' move. Dean appeared to be more offended by the comment than Sam was, too. Oh, you could see it _all over_ his face.

"Hey, we could gank thoseâ€| Wait, what did you say about _Hunters_?"

"_Combine_ Hunters, Dean." the younger sibling corrected him, lowering his voice into a whisper. "Not us."

Alyx sighed in response to the Vortigaunt's statement. "You're right; it's a little to early to trouble Sam and his brother into fighting."

She hesitated for a moment.

"Will you three be safe, though? It doesn't feel right leaving you behind here like thisâ€|"

Red eyes blinking, the placid extraterrestrial exchanged glances with his team, who nodded their head in assurance.

"Harm will not come to us," one of the other creatures spoke, "we shall maintain the structure of this ground."

A third Vortigaunt nodded his head in agreement, "To the void these opponents will return to, and to White Forest the Alyx Vance shall go."

"Make haste." spoke the closest Vortigaunt.

"Thank you, I can't tell you how much this means to-" Alyx's statement got abruptly cut off due to the approaching of something.

Luminous blue orbs could be seen in the night, once again, baring a vastly close resemblance to the creature the Vortigaunts had so easily executed. Two pairs of these glowing orifices, shining brightly in the night.

The dog-like mechanical creature hunched over, giving out a weird-sounding growl as the eerie lights approached.

"I think it's time to go, _now._" Alyx stated briskly as she withdrew her gun from her pocket, slowly backing away from the campsite.

Once again, the call of the Combine creatures could be heard. Not only were their shrill vocalizations heard, but two had jumped into the campsite, stomping on the objects that were once supplies, food, whatever it was that was kept in storage. Electricity raced from the Vortigaunt's hands as they prepared to defend themselves.

"The Freeman and his associates must leave!"

The quiet man, who was assumably Freeman kept his weapon out, however, did not fight. He made his way out of the campsite, Alyx running close by his side.

Her voice could be heard, "Stay together, everyone!"

Sam took hold of Dean's arm, dragging his stunned brother along with him. What was up with Dean? It wasn't like this was the first time the guy had waken up in some strange place. Hell, both of them had been captured by demons, vampires, you name it. Was his older brother really so afraid of aliens?

At the moment, everything was confusing. So many questions unanswered, and yet, no time to ask them; no time to even receive explanations. Right now, what was going on? Sam was running away from something he had never even heard of in the entirety of his life. He was just planted in god-knows-where, pulling shocked, sleepy Dean with him as he ran for his life, completely unarmed. How normal did that sound?

There was little time for rational thinking at a time like this. If he were to look back behind him, what would he see; more effortless execution? Would he witness the deaths of those creatures who had helped him?

Maybe now would be a good time to stop thinking, and just keep running. Focus on what's going now.

Eventually, the running slowed down. It transitioned into a slower-paced walking before everyone came to a halt.

"Ugh, godâ€¦ are we DONE running yet?" Dean protested as he stumbled around, his arm long ago released from Sam's grasp. "This has been one of the worst days I've had in a really long time."

Pfah. That had to be an exaggeration.

Dusky skies indicated that it was still night. It had only been a few hours, three or four at the most, that the group had arrived at their small shelter. What a day it had been. Fighting for his life, running for his lifeâ€¦ Sam couldn't necessarily call it an uncomplicated day. Not as if that was really, you knowâ€¦ Out of the ordinary. Just like another hunting case.

"As far as I can tellâ€¦" Alyx's voice grew quiet as she stifled a yawn, "We've been heading north, towards White Forest."

"White forest?" Sam inquired.

"It's a resistance base that lies North of City 17. There was a train station that could have easily taken us there, butâ€¦ It got, wellâ€¦ Destroyed."

"So, what are we supposed to do? Gracefully waltz over to the place?" Dean butted in.

"Unless you have any better ideas, I'd say we're going to have to make it to White Forest on foot." the girl hesitated a moment, then speaking under her breath, "_Again_."

What a long night this was going to be.

7. Divine Being

Sure, we all know the story of Gordon Freeman. Great guy, made it out of Black Mesa alive and saved mankind a time or two. A good friend, even if he wasn't very talkative. An MIT graduate with a P.H.D, completely professional and respectable. To tell the truth, it was kind of easy to be jealous of him. Gordon Freeman, the guy who saved the world and got the girl. What a fortunate life.

Of course, this wasn't _all_ about Gordon and his adventures. Looking beyond the story of Doctor Freeman, you might even find out more about others.

Putting it simply, the past twenty-or-so years had been nothing short of strenuous for Barney Calhoun. The 7-hour war had come and gone so quickly; before he knew it, Calhoun was leaving behind his career at Black Mesa and signing up for Civil Protection. Nearly twenty years were spent 'working' for Combine Overwatch, helping citizens escape in secrecy. While it certainly was great to help out others, there was no doubt that living in a Combine-occupied world made him severely melancholy.

This was the reason why the Resistance uprising had such significance to him. When Gordon Freeman suddenly showed up again after so many years, he stirred everything up. Just as Gordon had easily pissed off the US military, he had become the Combine's worst enemy, truly giving meaning to the word _freedom_. It encouraged ordinary citizens to fight for their rights, to fight for Earth itself. Most importantly, it restored Barney's faith in humanity.

The co-leader of the Resistance arrived at White Forest mere hours after Gordon and Alyx had left. Apparently, doctor Kleiner suggested they do so before making their way to the Borealis. Didn't seem to make much sense as to why they would be there, butâ€¦ Kleiner had his reasons. Poor Alyx probably needed some time to settle after what happened to her father. Man, _everyone_ needed some time to settle after that. No words could even begin to fathom the gravity of Eli's death.

Eli Vance was more than just '_some scientist'_. If the word _honorable_ were to be redefined with some modern definition, that man would have been a perfect example for the word. Eli was an inspiration to all of the resistance; he proved that anyone could be strong, even when life threw unforeseen shit at you. Calhoun couldn't have been more pissed - more _infuriated_ when he was informed of Eli's passing. To see someone so courageous go the way he did, it wasâ€¦ It was so unsettling.

As for Barney himself, the current day was nothing short of uneventful; guard duty, making sure the _actual_ forest surrounding White Forest was in good standing. Really, though, the sad thing about this was that someone thought it would be a _good_ idea to put _him_ in charge of getting rid of the Headcrab infestation. Wasn't it

absolutely wonderful, seeing as he already despised the crustaceans' very name?

Crisp mountainous air could be felt softly brushing against his worn-out Civil Protection uniform as Barney marched throughout the area. There had been a few times where the man had just stopped, taking out a few pesky parasites who were stupid enough to waddle in front of him. Occasionally, a zombie would stagger over to him just to make his guard duty less pleasurable. Man, did he hate them things.

Overall, it was a relatively stressful day; nothing out of the ordinary, either.

The events that followed, however, could indubitably be described as _out of the ordinary_.

Barely noticeable was a faint humming noise; a sound that could easily be compared to the sound of ringing. Though subtle and mute at first, the unidentifiable noise gradually intensified, frequency ascending swiftly. Humming transitioned into high-pitched vibrations that resonated throughout the once placid forest. Sound traveled all over the vicinity, similar to a piercing siren.

Panicking, Barney tightly clasped two gloved hands over his head, trying to smother the ghastly buzzing. He couldn't hear himself think; every single thought in his mind was hopelessly scattered and unintelligible.

The sound just got louder, and louder, and louder, andâ€¦
â€¦

It stopped.

The perturbing sound had abruptly stopped. Strangely enough, it left not a single piece of evidence that it had taken place, save for Barney's newly met headache. Furthermore, it also left him wondering what even _happened_ moments ago. Was that all in his head? Was his sanity finally breaking down and flushing itself down the toilet? Could it be the effects ofâ€¦ _Combine Advisors_? They had no reason to come back to White Forest. Why would those damn things return? He hadn't ever gotten a chance to encounter an Advisor; not implying that he would ever _want_ to, of course. From how Alyx described them, they were beyond terrible, and Barney wasn't at all enthusiastic about meeting up with one of them.

Calhoun kept a tenacious grip on his Overwatch Standard Issue Pulse Rifle, lest something jump out at him. He wasn't going to let his guard down. _Not here, not now. Then again, you should __**never **__let your guard down. It isn't safe around here._

Taking a few steps around the area, the ex-security guard surveyed the area, much like he did in his earlier days. It was peaceful; nothing out of the ordinary, and the ambience of the forest had returned its natural state. Yet, some instinct in Barney's head told him that it wasn't completely natural. Something about it seemed _supernatural_, even.

A gentle fluttering sound, similar to the flapping of wings, was

heard.

When Barney approached the source of this noise, what he found was most unexpected.

It was not a Combine Advisor, nor was it any sort of wretched, zombie-like creature. In actuality, it was a merely humanly figure, presumably that of a man. The man wore a lengthy, beige trench coat that appeared to be somewhat damaged, or stained, rather, with a pale rusty color. He was shaking slightly, and his overall posture seemed to be highly precarious.

"Hey, man, you okay over there?" Barney spoke up, cautiously approaching the stranger.

The strange man stood still, remaining silent without uttering a single word. His only response was everlasting hesitation, until Barney ultimately decided to approach the other more sternly.

"It ain't safe running around out here unarmed, you know." The resistance member spoke up again in attempts to make conversation.

Wasn't the first time Barney spoke to someone who didn't respond. Hell, that was basically his entire friendship with Gordon. Yet, this stranger was not Gordon, and when Calhoun got a closer look at the other man, he was able to see a noticeable amount of blood.

"_Uhâ€|_" Barney uncomfortably waited for the stranger to say something. "You doing alright?"

Finally, after no response for the longest time, the trench-coated guy finally decided to turn around to face Barney. His facial expression read serious all over, in spite of the fact that blood was trickling from his nostrils and his skintone was notably pale.

"No." was the only response the injured man gave as he instantaneously collapsed, beginning his descent towards the gravelly ground.

Fortunately, Barney was able to intervene in time just enough to keep the stranger standing. The dead weight of the ill man was quite a shock to Calhoun; he wasn't at all used to carrying others around. Was this what Gordon had to go through whenever Barney got wasted? Poor Gordon; now Barney finally knew what it felt like. Worst of all, he didn't even _know_ the guy he was helping up.

"Yeah, thanks for the forewarning. Real helpful, buddy." Barney was in somewhat of a struggle to hold up the wounded individual.

Eventually, the other stabilized his posture, finally able to hold himself up without toppling to the ground. Calhoun let go of the stranger's shoulder as he gave an incredulous look.

With a sigh, he questioned the stranger, "Man, you're definitely injured. If you need medical attention, I can contact one of the medics 'round here."

A hand drawn to his own forehead, the trench-coated man let out a sigh of his own, a disheartened expression surfacing.

"I am searching for a man named Dean Winchester." His cobalt eyes trailed over to gaze at Barney; a gesture that made the ex-security guard feel slight discomfort. "Have you encountered him?"

"Sorry, can't say I've heard of the guy. 'Remember where you last saw him?"

"Not exactly, no." The cerulean-eyed one kept his somber gaze. "I'm going to keep looking for him."

He then closed his eyes, standing incredibly still, almost as if he was waiting for a sort of event to happen. Looked like he was trying pretty hard to accomplish something, too.

Calhoun stood on the same ground, waiting for something to happen as well. Yet, not a single event took place, not a single movement around them, save for the trees that gently rustled with the wind.

"You've got a real interesting way of finding things." Barney added sarcastically. "Any success with that?"

"I don't understand," a subtle hint of nervousness was now in the stranger's voice, "My teleportation should be working."

Instant teleportation? Was that what this guy was trying to do? He must've hit his head really hard for those kind of concepts to pop up in his head. No human could achieve anything of the sort without any proper devices.

"Hold on a secondâ€¦ You can teleport?"

"Previously, yes, I was able to teleport. I am no longer able to do so." the stranger hesitated for a moment before continuing, "Regretfully, I have been devoid of such abilities."

Unsure of how to respond to that, Calhoun just precariously changed the conversation subject. "Uhâ€¦ Yeah, teleportation. Rightâ€¦ Hey, you look kind ofâ€¦ lost, what did you say your name was again?"

"I am Castiel, Angel of the Lord." the other stated flatly.

â€¦Angelâ€¦ Angel of the what?

Barney had heard some bizarre things in the past, butâ€¦ Thisâ€¦ This had to top it all. Of course he was skeptical, but he felt it would be best to play along with Castiel's delusions in the meantime. It's never a good idea to piss off a mental person.

"Barney Calhoun, at your service." Barney introduced himself in return. "Say, Castiel, you look just a little injured. You sure you don't need some help with that?"

Castiel seemed to disregard his statement entirely. He payed no heed to his opened wounds.

"I sense you're doubting my statement." the 'angel' spoke, continuing to make Barney uncomfortable with his fierce, unwavering gaze. "Rest assured, I am speaking the truth."

The man in the trench coat then approached Barney, extending his arm towards him.

"Hey, hey, what are you-" the ex-security guard's sentence got abruptly cut short as Castiel's hand collided with his forehead.

The guy appeared to be extremely concentrated, a highly determined appearance crossing his face. Not a single utterance escaped him; he only stood there silently as he tried to work some psychic-magical-power crap on him. Of course, that wasn't effective at all; it had no effect on Barney, and he only proceeded to push Castiel's hand away from his face.

Barney opened his mouth as if he were about to say something in defense of himself, but no words escaped him either. Truth be told, there really wasn't anything to say. Man, that guy was weird.

"That did not work as I anticipated." Castiel sighed.

"What a shame." responded Barney as he rolled his eyes.

"I will provide you with proper evidence once I regain my strength." the trench-coated man stated as he calmly rested his arms to his sides. "In the meantime, I'm afraid I may need your help, Barney."

"Go on." Calhoun gave a nod, ready to listen to the other.

It was kind of suspicious, in actuality; the fact that a complete stranger would claim to be an angel, of all things. An angel that apparently could teleport and, well, do whatever it was the guy was attempting to do with Barney's head. Barney wasn't much for religion, not after the Black Mesa incident; he had lost all hope of any type of God existing. The whole concept almost seemed foreign to him now, in fact. If there was a God, then why was it the Combine existed, took over Earth, enslaved and brutally massacred millions of people? Something about that just didn't seem right, and now there was someone claiming to be an 'Angel of the Lord', of all things. Didn't that sound pretty damn suspicious?

Castiel's voice was heard again, "I would like you to assist me in looking for Dean Winchester."

In hindsight, that didn't sound too terrible. It wasn't as if Barney had anything else to do for the rest of the day, only guard duty and waiting for Gordon and his girl to return from their fancy little expedition. Maybe trench coat would finally agree to get those wounds checked out. Perhaps he could even make a useful addition to the Resistance, assuming he had knowledge on anything rational. Besides, helping others was always an honor, strange as some of the people were.

"Any specifications?" the resistance associate raised an eyebrow.

"Dean Winchester will play a very significant role in the near future. It is imperative that I know of his location."

"I'll see what I can do, man. What do you say about heading back to White Forest before we get started on finding your friend? You look like you could use a bandage or two, orâ€¦ twenty."

"I have no idea what White Forest is." Castiel took a few steps closer to him, "Even so, medical attention would be beneficial. Lead on."

"We'll find a doctor for you when we get there. The base isn't too far from here, about a mile or so. If we head towards it now, we should have enough time. You got a gun with you, Castiel?"

In response to the previous question, Castiel glanced down as if examining his own clothing, reaching into his pockets, then looking back to Barney.

"No," the other male admitted, "I have found no use in firearms."

"Well then," Barney paused, setting down his Pulse Rifle and reaching into his own bulletproof armor. He unearthed a 9mm Pistol, extending it to his acquaintance. "You're going to need this. It's plain stupid to walk around here unarmed, with all the Headhumpers on the prow."

Castiel stared at the USP match for a moment before hesitantly accepting it. He appeared to be highly bewildered, almost as if he hadn't used a gun before. Still, the man held it in his hand as he gave one last confused glance at it.

"Okay." replied Castiel.

Barney simply chose to disregard Castiel's peculiar behavior, instead of judging him further. Taking in consideration the fact that time was ticking by at a steady pace, there was no room for more sassy remarks.

Only after a few minutes was their walk interrupted by a disturbance. A smoggy four-legged carapace crept up behind the trench-coated man. Mouselike squeaks were emitted from the crustacean as it lagged along behind him. This creature was not noticed by Barney, however. It was not until Castiel questioned its existence that the ex-security guard reared his head to glance at the creature.

"An extraterrestrial life form is following me, Barney." Castiel glanced back as well, then focused his gaze on Barney again. "Should I be concerned?"

"Uh,_ yeah_, you should." A storm of pulse rained from Calhoun's rifle as he shot the creature; the echo lasting longer than the shots themselves. "_That's_ a headhumper. A poison one, too; they're the worst."

"Should I have eradicated it; thisâ€¦" he paused for a minute before repeating the phrase, "'_Head humper'_"

"Damn right, you should have. Open fire on those things. Don't even

give them a chance to jump onto you."

The other male nodded his head to express acknowledgement. "I understand. I'll remember this advise."

"It'll do you good." Barney replied, "The forest is a hotspot for these parasites. Not as bad as Ravenholm was, but a hell of a lot worse than what the city had."

The duo resumed their stroll towards the base almost as soon as Barney began to speak again, "I'm going to assume that you don't know about the wildlife here, then."

Castiel tilted his head ever so slightly, "I have not. What is there to know about the fauna?"

"Well, first of all, stay away from the headhumpers. They're absolutely no benefit to anyone. Same goes for zombies. Kill them too."

"Understood." remarked trench-coat, "I was unable to gather much information on the world you live in. Is it true that your society is ruled under a dictatorship?"

An obvious question, yet, a good one.

"You mean The Combine? Yeah, that's how it's been for, likeâ€| 20 years. How long have you been living under a rock?"

"I have been affiliated with Heaven until recently. I am not from this universe you exist in, nor have I ever resided under a boulder."

Barney couldn't help but snicker a little at Castiel's straightforwardness. At this point, it was hard to tell if the guy was even serious. Bet the guy was a real fun to have at parties.

"Not to say that you were wrong, though. I guess the Combine kind of has been a dictatorship, you know, taking into account all of the people they've bludgeoned. The term dictator does fit the old administrator, too. Doctor Wallace Breen; what a major-league ass."

Castiel remained silent; it was kind of hard to tell whether he was even listening or not.

"I could go on and on forever about how I hate his guts, though. What about you, Castiel? Where are you from?"

"Heaven." Castiel flatly explained. "I have been around since before the Earth was conceived. Likewise, the universe I originate from is the same in which Dean Winchester has originated. We have no clue as to how he got here, however. This is why I am looking for him."

Silence fell upon Barney; he was still pretty suspicious of what this Castiel guy was saying. The whole concept sounded beyond crazy, and crazy was an understatement. Perhaps if some proof was given, Barney would have believed. Yet, at the current time, he was not convinced.

Not yet, if ever a chance of being convinced.

"Keep your trench-coat on, dude. We'll find the guy sooner or later."

"Sooner would be preferable."

"If it makes you feel better, we're almost back to White Forest. You can send a radio transmission as soon as you get there, alright?"

Before Castiel was granted a single chance to respond, something leaped out in front of him. Another Headcrab, what do you know. It was a standard one, all thick and fleshy. It leaped straight towards the man's face, sharpened, bloodstained teeth gleaming in the sunlight. The sound of fabric tearing was heard; it had unsuccessfully latched its front legs into Castiel's shoulder, another sharp leg scraping his chest.

Castiel gave no reaction of fright or shock, though he did wince as it lunged into his flesh. He raised the pistol, pressing it against the Headcrab and pulling the trigger several times, alien blood and viscera spurting out the other side of the creature. It descended to the ground in front of the man, letting out a final cry of agony.

The man only stared down at the deceased creature as it rest on the ground. What wounds he had previously were nothing compared to the gash on his shoulder and chest. Fresh crimson liquid seeped from these lacerations, giving a more prominent rusty tint to his clothing.

"Now I understand the severity of your... Head Humpers, as you call them." Castiel stated as he directed his attention to the bleeding punctures he had acquired.

What confused Barney the most was that the guy now had serious wounds on his body, and he only reacted lightly to it.

If it had been Barney, he probably would've freaked the hell out. Wouldn't that have been the natural reaction to getting jabbed in the shoulder by headcrab legs?

"Shit, man!" Calhoun dashed over to the injured acquaintance, examining the open abrasion. "You alright?"

"In spite of my high tolerance to painâ€¦" Castiel delayed his response as he covered his own wounds, applying pressure to them. "No, I do not believe I am. My vessel has sustained trauma."

A bit of a delayed reaction he gave. He didn't quite seemâ€¦ used to feeling pain. Physical pain, at least.

"Okay, man. Come on, let's get you back. We're almost there." Barney helped the other walk, keeping him standing.

Castiel was dangerously close to falling over again; it was evident that he needed to be stabilized. Who wouldn't, though? Headcrabs were disgusting, dangerous little pests; getting clawed in the chest certainly didn't help that. Strange as the guy was acting, he still

appeared to be in a great deal of discomfort.

When the duo finally reached White Forest, Barney's acquaintance had nearly passed out. It was difficult to tell whether this was caused by blood loss, fatigue, or the combination of both. Regardless, it was safe to say that he was in need of medical attention.

"Calhoun, you're back early." One of the rebels guarding the base noted, "Who's that you got with you?"

"Found him standing in the middle of nowhere, believe it or not." replied Barney as he held up the injured man, "I don't really have time to talk, though. The guy just got spooned by a headhumper."

The rebels guarding the gate exchanged confused glances between each other.

Barney's voice was snappy and impatient, "_Headcrabs_. Let me in already, would you?"

"Oh, sure thing, Calhoun, sir." one rebel replied as the gate began to part.

Upon entering the base, Barney sought medical attention for Castiel. He had confidence that the medics would succeed in taking care of the guy until he was conscious.

Meanwhile, Calhoun had made his way up to a room with a radio transmitter present. There was a low possibility that anyone would even answer the transmission, _but_â€ He had agreed to help Castiel, and he would not go back on his word.

Carefully, turning on the transmitter and adjusting the microphone, Barney spoke into the transmitter.

"White Forest; this is White Forest, do you read?"

8. Prolongation

Thump.

Thump.

Thump.

A red eye glared furiously; it was accompanied by the low pounds of heavy footsteps. It stared-God know's _what_ its intentions were-It did not blink, it did not flinch in the slightest. The single crimson light kept its gaze on Dean, as if it were the unflinching stare of a furious, cyclopes-hellhound.

"Dude, I think that robot likes you." Sam's voice was heard close by, and with a glance at his face, it was clear that he was grinning quite snidely.

"Shut up." Dean grimaced, first at Sam, then at the eight-foot tall mechanism walking beside him. "It's bad enough that the thing won't stop staring at me like it wants my head on a platter."

The older Winchester's statement got a chuckle out of Alyx, who responded to him with confidence, "DãG just gets curious about strangers. As long as you're not part of Overwatch, you don't have to be afraid of him."

Dean didn't like the sound of this one bit. He'd been told so much about how serious the "Combine" was, but had he really received much of an explanation? Not entirely, no; for all he knew, those two weirdos could be deceiving the brothers completely.

"And, how do I know that I can trust you people, but not the Combine?"

"You're being rude again, Dean," Sam chipped in, his voice lowered, "These people just saved our lives."

"Well, you said earlier that you'd tell more once we got out of the city. I think we deserve a bit more intel now."

Alyx exchanged glances with Gordon, who gave something of an uneasy nod of his head.

"Yeah, you're right." responded the woman, her voice softened, "It isn't fair of us at all to keep this kind of information to ourselves; you and your brother deserve to know more about the Combine. Now that there's more time for talking, what do you want to know?"

"Everything. For starters, what makes them so terrible?"

"Well," Alyx began to explain, her tone of voice sounding somewhat agitated, "If someone took over the world you've been living in your whole life, slaughtered millions of people, enslaved the human race, and brainwashed a huge chunk of the planet, how would you feel? It'd be safe to say that you'd be pissed, right?"

Dean did not answer this question for a matter of seconds, he only remained silent as he contemplated what Alyx told him. If anything, their 'Combine' sounded a hell of a lot like demons, literally. Actually, it sounded a lot like what was going on back at home. Lucifer and his bunch had very similar motives to whatever was taking over this unfamiliar world. Seeing as the world in which the brothers had originated was not yet destroyed or enslaved, Dean could only imagine it would be terrible.

After a moment, Dean decided to speak, "Yeah, I'd be more than pissed. I'm, umâ€ Sorry to hear that."

"It'sâ€ It's fine, I could go on forever about how much I hate Overwatch. Honestly, I only want this war to end. Do you know how much it sucks to be in constant threat of getting killed?"

Sam snickered. "More than you know it."

Kind of funny how the two strangers seemed to be living a similar lifestyle to a hunter. In the Winchester's sense, at least; two people with a few other allies who have to deal with the Apocalypse hanging over their head, fighting shit that any normal, apple pie life-type son of a bitch would be scared to death of. Take those two and put them in a situation inâ€ the real world, or where the

Winchesters were from, rather, and they'd probably be pretty decent at hunting.

"So, what about you two? I mean, you've got plenty of information on our situation now. How did you guys end up in a place like this?" inquired Alyx.

Yep, time to lie here. Dean had been thinking of a perfect lie for this one.

"We're travelers, Dean and I are." Sam interrupted the older brother's silent lying-scheme. "We go from place to place, hunting things."

Oh, way to tell the truth, Sammy.

"We work together as hunters." Sam continued to tell the blatant truth. "Not in the Combine sense, of course. It's been part of the family business for, uhâ€¦ a very long time."

Dean rolled his eyes, knowing the negative results of telling the truth. When was it ever a good idea? Why did Sam think that telling the truth was such a dandy idea? Maybe it was some kind of guilt thing after all of the demon blood he chugged. Well, that was â€¦ start for redemption, or something. Tiny, minuscule baby steps first, right?

"I understand," the girl replied, "and you say that you've no recollection on how you got here?"

The elder Winchester brother resumed speech, "Nope. Absolutely nothing. Last thing I remember before getting here was going to bed in a crappy motel."

He concluded his statement with a cheeky grin.

"A working motel?" Alyx questioned Dean's statement.

Dean hesitated for a few solid seconds before asking a question of his own in return. "Yeah, what other kind of motel would it be? A fake motel?"

An amused chuckle escaped Alyx. "I just didn't know they were still in service, or even existed anymore, for that matter."

No motels? What kind of cruel, cruel place was this? Where would anyone even sleep?

"Alyx," Sam remarked, addressing the woman, "You said the world's been like this for twenty years now, correct?"

"That's right."

"So, what year did this all begin?"

A bit more hesitation from Alyx's crew; her and Gordon both exchanged long, pained glances for a while there. Something hinted that this was becoming a touchy subject.

"I'm sorry, I didn't realize it was-" the younger brother stammered,

evidently embarrassed by his curiosity that had taken a wrong turn.

"Oh, no, no. That's alright." Alyx gave an uneasy smile, reassuring Sam. "I believe it was around 2000 that everything escalated. I don't remember it all very well, seeing as I was only a little kid at the time."

Welp, this changes everything. Not only were the two brothers on a planet covered by alien freaks, but they had also been sent to the future. Oh, Dean swore to God; if this was Cas' faultâ€|

"You're saying we're living in two-thousand twenty?" Dean investigated, almost looking for reassurance. "No strings attached, we are literally in the future?"

"The future? No, we're kind of in the present now. The resistance may have great teleportation advantages, but we certainly haven't mastered time travel, unlessâ€|" her sentence abruptly trailed off.

Dean was legibly restless. "Unless?"

"â€|Unless your case here is similar to Gordon's. Now, I obviously don't know what happened word-for-word, but I do know that he sort of disappeared for a solid twenty years. Perhaps you're in a similar predicament?"

"Great." Dean sarcastically remarked, giving an over-feign grin. "I just love predicaments."

Although Dean was uncertain of exactly how long the team had been together, it was evident that the night had come to pass. The once pitch-black, starless sky had become slightly more illuminated, a soft tangerine color now beginning to make its appearance in the sky. One of the biggest surprises here was the very fact that Dean was able to get his sleep for a period of time. Strange, he hadn't seen anyone else asleep; Sam looked like he hadn't gotten a second of shuteye. Not that it was really a drastic change in either brothers' lives; they seldom got in a reasonable amount of sleep.

"Hey, you see something over there?" Motioning towards an obscure object in the distance, Sam looked over to his older brother.

"What?" Dean replied, leaning forwards slightly, his gaze fixated on the ambiguous items in the distance. His walking came to a halt as he stared towards the distant cluster of items. "â€|Yeah, what is that?"

"No idea, should we go check it out?" Sam shrugged, his face more visible with the coming sunrise.

Dean nodded his head in response, then responding verbally, "Yeah, uhâ€| Alyx, Gordon? You guys? You got me? Me and Sam are going to go check out that mysterious lump ofâ€| whatever."

"Oh?" Alyx inquired, "Sure thing, Gordon and I will wait here."

She stopped walking, giving a smile to her companion.

"Hold up a sec, what exactly is so important about this pile of _whatever_?" A note of confusion was present in Dean's voice as the two brothers began walking towards what caught their attention.

"Nothing, nothing, I just, uh Thought it looked like something."

"_Something_? You want to elaborate a little more?"

"It looked to me like it was a corpse." Sam's voice trailed off as he approached the mess, a foul scent plaguing the air.
"Corpse."

There it indeed was, a corpse; one of slight recency, it appeared as if rigor mortis was just settling in. A gaping lesion was visible in the cadaver's chest, though all signs of blood had been drained what seemed like days ago.

"Poor son of a bitch. What do you think got him?" Dean made a perturbed face.

It wasn't unusual for the Winchesters to see the deceased. Death was all around them, literally and figuratively. If anything, it felt like working any old case. The only minor difference being that nothing supernatural had caused this death. Honestly, though, it was kind of difficult to tell, seeing as this wasn't the Earth the two were used to; new rules, new monsters, and obviously, new _aliens_.

"No clue. Could have been one of those things we faced back at the camp, but I clearly have no way of determining something like that."

What truly caught Dean's attention was not how this complete stranger had passed away, but what lay next to the body.

"Would you get a look at _this_?" A smile was quick to show up on the older Winchester's face.

There, next to the pile of deadness, was a shotgun, much like the one Gordon had magically pulled out of nowhere. A SPAS-12, in good condition, too. In most cases, finding a shotgun out of nowhere wouldn't have been that special. However, now that the boys had been tossed into a completely foreign world full of things they knew nothing about, things had changed. A gun had a lot more significance now, even if Dean did prefer something lighter (and easier to hide) such as a pistol.

"Coming here wasn't such a bad idea after all. Do you think it's morally permissible to take this bad boy along with us?"

The taller brother shrugged his shoulders again. "Not exactly, no. Taking it along _is_ the most logical thing thing to do, though. Who's going to take it?"

"I call shotgun!" Dean responded almost instantaneously, a grin covering his face.

"_Real_ clever." Sam replied with a sarcastic tone of voice, "What am I supposed to defend myself with, then?"

Dean knelt down, picking up the firearm and holding it close. "Dunno. Rely on your strength and height advantage? C'mon, we're making Alyx and the mute guy wait."

Robot hellhound thing staring at Dean again. What a _great_ way to regroup.

Surely enough, when the two brothers approached the party once again, there _it_ was. Same red eye glared with intensity, still looking as if it wanted Dean's head on a plate.

However, now that the older brother had managed to find a weapon of his own, he felt more reassured when confronting the mechanical hound, even if the synthetic creature _did_ turn out to be harmless.

"Found some leverage there, did you?" Alyx remarked as she noticed the weapon in Dean's hands. He did not raise the weapon, only kept it close by him defensively.

"Hell yeah." the Winchester managed a smile, though his younger brother did not share this enthusiasm.

"Sam, did you get anything yourself?" the woman asked as she directed her attention to Sam.

"Notâ€¦ not exactly, no." Sam admitted, looking relatively unimpressed. "There was only one shotgun we could find, as you can see."

Sam carried over his unimpressed expression over to Dean, who merely shrugged in a play of innocence. "Hey, don't look at me."

"That's alright," Alyx spoke again, "We might be able to help you out on that."

Her gaze focused on Gordon, who, in return, glanced back at her.

"Do you have any spare weapons, Gordon?"

The silent man paused for a moment, a pensive look on his face.

His shotgun-identical to the one that Dean now had-was placed onto the back of his peculiar armor. He reached back a second time, appearing to pull out a second gun; one entirely different from what he was holding before. One that was completely invisible prior to this moment.

Freeman now held a single Submachine Gun, which he cautiously handed over to Sam. The taller brother reluctantly accepted this weapon, a somewhat awkward-looking smile on his face. He also looked confused as to where the weapon came from.

"Thanks, man." Sam politely added.

"Hold on a second, where did-" Dean stammered, leaving his interrupted sentence unfinished as Alyx provided an

explanation.

"It's a Weapons Management System that comes installed in Gordon's hazard suit." she clarified.

Technobabble, presumably? Dean honestly didn't understand what that meant; it was all futuristic nonsense to him. Robots, aliens, weapon-management blah blah blahâ€¦ It was only a matter of time before unicorns popped out of nowhere and started crapping rainbows all over the place.

"I gotcha. That makes perfect sense." Dean lied, a smile on his face.

Alyx put her hands on her hips, shifting her weight to lean on one leg. "Shall we move on, then? We've still got quite the walk if we plan to get to White Forest again at a reasonable time."

Ugh. More walking.

"Ready when you are." Sam remarked, his unimpressed temperament had lessened now that he had obtained his own weapon.

Thus, the journey continued; a journey full of walking and intimidation by the robot that loved Dean too much to stop staring at him. He must've been the only one who was bothered by the nonliving, yet living entity. Sam didn't seem to mind it, hell, maybe he even _liked_ the damned thing. Of course, Gordon and Alyx probably had a good reason to consider the thing part of their strange survivor-resistance psuedo-family, butâ€¦ Dean didn't have any reason yet to like the thing. In fact, it reminded him ever so slightly of the very creatures that dragged him to hell a year ago. Maybe it was the whole name thing that perturbed him so much. _DÃ~G._ How creative.

Slowly but surely, the sun continued to ascend throughout the sky. The tangerine of the sky further transitioned into a golden yellow. Though no sun was directly visible, it was still unmissable that the daylight approached.

After a certain amount of time had passed, it became difficult for Dean to go on without a complaint or two.

"You have any idea where we're even going, or are we just wandering aimlessly?"

"No matter how many times you ask, Dean, the answer is going to stay the same." Alyx retorted.

Dean let a yawn escape himself, "Yeah. _North_. You're one-hundred percent sure that our destination is just _North_? No missing details? 'Cause it feels like we're lost, and I don't see anything out here but trees."

"There's a town coming up soon." the woman mentioned, "It's small and abandoned, but if you want to stop and rest, it'll be the ideal place. Does that sound good to you?"

"Yep," Sam answered the question before the older brother had a chance to, "That sounds perfect." He glanced over to Dean, an

expression on his face that could easily be described as weary.
"Right, Dean?"

"Yeah, sure, that sounds _awesome_." The shorter brother responded, a very obvious tone of sarcasm in his voice.

Already, he was beginning to miss his ownâ€¦ _world_, if one could even call it that. What was going on back there without him and his brother saving the world? How many people were dying right now as he thought about all of this; how many people weren't being saved because of Dean and his brother? How was Bobby holding up without them there? Where the hell was Cas in all of this?

Even though he had only been in this world for a single night, Dean couldn't help but think about all of these things; he couldn't stop himself from wondering what he was missing out there at home.

Still, the journey went on, and as they continued to walk, he grew more and more impatient, anxious, fatigued. It was a wonder how Sam could deal with all of this and not complain, even for a few seconds. What was going on in his _not-so-little_ brother's head? Positive, 'light at the end of the tunnel'-type thoughts, maybe? Or was his thought process more centered around demon blood, and how he was eager to pounce on the next demon that he saw.

â€¦_Are_ there any demons in this place, anyways?_

Man, he hoped there wasn't any. If that was the case, they'd all be _more than screwed._

Overall, the entirety of this so-called expedition was indeed very tedious. Even walking at a decent pace seemed to get the group nowhere of interest. Trees, trees, more trees. Pine trees and all kind of other trees.

This would be so much easier if the Impala was here.

Continuous walking went on further until the group came to a halt. Notable was a cliff of some sort; a ledge that overlooked the wreckage of the cityâ€¦ City 17-something-or-other. The whole place looked unmistakably _terrible_, charred to a crisp like an overcooked burger that got set on fire once it was done overcooking. Dean _did_ kind of wonder what had happened to the whole place. He had wondered exactly what happened to the urban area; certainly it wasn't _always_ in shambles like this. It must have been lively before it went to hell. Alyx didn't really cover what happened to the city, either; Dean could easily assume that it was the Combine's fault, in part. Must have taken a lot of those 'Hunter' things to destroy a whole metropolis.

Upon approaching this steep overlook, the older Winchester couldn't help but feel dizzy. He wasn't at all fond of heights, and standing so close to a ledge only made him feel more uneasy.

"So, that's City 17?" the inquiring voice of Sam was audible. A glance up at the taller brother showed that he was most likely asking Alyx this question.

The woman nodded before speaking, "You bet. Every last piece of it."

"I wonder if those Vortigaunts made it out alright." Sam responded, "Those things that ambushed us back thereâ€¦ They could have killed us, couldn't they?"

"It is very possible that we could have. I hope the Vortigaunts were able to take out those Hunters. Those things are brutal."

The fact that those vile things were called _Hunters_ was enough to keep Dean confused. It had taken a second for him to realize that Alyx _wasn't_ talking about what he and his brother were. That one might take some getting used to.

Dean interrupted. "So, uhâ€¦ You know how much I _love_ to hear your heart-to-heart emotional friendship chats, but can we get moving?"

His question got odd looks from the others.

"_Right,_" Alyx shook her head, changing the subject. "We're getting close to the town."

She motioned towards a desolate-looking cave area, then proceeding to take a few steps towards it. "Gotta pass through here first!"

Gordon was the first to step foot into this cave-like tunnel. The inner walls of the mine were lined with old, rotting wood that had a foul scent when approached. When getting closer to this dank structure, this smell only worsened.

The orange-suited guy seemed like a strange kind of leader; always looked nervous or upset about something. Although he refused to speak to anyone, he still managed to walk through the place fearlessly, shooting away any zombie that staggered towards him. What a weird guy.

Dean, on the other hand, kept his shotgun close by; he wasn't going to let any of those alien-zombie douchebags get close to him.

Descending through a sizable indentation on the rotting wooden floors, Dean continued to follow his acquaintances. The darkness did indeed increase the difficulty of navigation, and he faced a nasty surprise when stepping into somethingâ€¦ crunchy.

"Ugh, manâ€¦ What the hell is _this_ crap?" the elder Winchester groaned as he lifted his foot from the corpse of a giant insect-like creature. A blood-like substance stuck to his shoe as he pulled his leg away, leaving a trail of malodorous slime.

"That, my friend is a dead Antlion." Alyx frowned, though her attitude didn't sound nearly as mortified as Dean's.

"How can you say that so casually?" Dean's expression was one of offense and aggravation. "This is disgusting!"

Alyx ducked under the boarded up passageway, kicking off to the side any dead things that were in her way. "You get used to it; it won't hurt you."

Emerald eyes glanced to Sam, who appeared to be choking back laughter or sassy retorts.

"Yeah. Keep laughing, Sammy. _Reeeeaal_ hilarious." the shorter, yet older brother pouted as he spoke. "See how funny it is when_ you're _knee-deep in alien bug guts."

"At least you didn't get zombie all over yourself." Sam replied.

"Just don't go drinking that, too."

The younger Winchester grimaced at Dean's criticism. "Seriously? Do we need to have this conversation _now_?"

Dean smiled. "Nope."

As Dean went to catch up to Alyx and Gordon, he could hear his younger brother let out a sigh. Evidently, it was pretty hard to trust Sammy anymore, after everything that had happened with Ruby. Something like that just couldn't be easily mended by trust.

When the brothers had caught up to the other two and theirâ€|_robot_, Alyx was the first (and only) one to greet them.

"Hey, guys. Got anything you want to transmit over here?" a small grin was present on her face.

Before them was a shabby shed-like building, rather small in size and only one story high. Written on the building was Russian, though, Dean was unable to read what it said.

â€|Holy crap, was he in _Russia_?

"Dean?" Sam glanced over to his older sibling.

"Me?" Dean moistened to himself, then shook his head, "Nope, I'm good."

Alyx folded her arms, standing in contemplative posture. "Yeah, I guess it's better not to give the radio a try. Last time Gordon and I tried it, the Combine ended up using it to track us."

She opened the door to the run-down shack, walking inside. "We'll need to pass through here to get across that fence, of course. Climbing barbed-wire really isn't necessary."

When walking through the metallic shanty, Dean noticed something that seemedâ€|_out of place_. On one of the wooden boards inside of the shack sat a littleâ€|_garden gnome_? It wasn't too weird. Something about it was just strange to see-a little garden gnome staring at him with its beady little eyes and a smug little grin on his face. He couldn't help but glare at the thing as he passed by it. _Friggin' gnomes_.

Passing through the building, the party found another mining tunnel; much like the previous one, this one reeked of rotting wood and dead things. It didn't appear to be too big, though; it was straightforward and a literal light was visible at the end.

**SCREECH!**

A small life form on the ground came scrambling over to Dean, it's little legs flickering about at top-speed. It began to pray, about to pounce up at him before he instinctively took it out with his shotgun.

"_Holy crap!_" exclaimed Dean, making a disgusted face at the creature.

"Wow." Alyx raised an eyebrow. "Good reflexes."

He stared down at the perished parasite. It slightly resembled the Headcrabs he had encountered earlier, save for a a deep grayish brown hue to it.

"Is something wrong with that thing, or do they normally look like that?" he questioned, raising an eyebrow.

Alyx glanced down at the carcass. "Everything's wrong with it. It's a poison Headcrab."

"There's poison variants?" Sam inquired, attempting to get a closer look at it.

"Yeah, and they're little shits." the woman frowned, "Anyways, though, the town's just up ahead."

A brief downhill walk was all it took for them to get out of the second tunnel, ultimately returning to the morning sky above them. There stood a small town, filled with plenty of rusty old buildings like the ones seen before. It appeared to be some kind of mining town, which would make perfect sense, seeing as there was so many minecarts and rails nearby.

Finally, a break from all this walking.

9. Beans?

Entering the deserted town, Gordon could not help but feel weariness creep about in his mind. He had been here before. This town-it gave him a sinking feeling deep down-was not well deserving of his trust. Furthermore, the little memories he did associate with the small, rural town were all bitter; every last one of them were.

The siblings had parted ways with the resistance leaders, though only temporary. Seemingly chagrined, the taller brother had excused the both of them as they set off to speak with one another. Both of the men seemed as though they were awfully irate, more so at each other rather than the world surrounding them. Although it was not Gordon's responsibility to worry too much of them, he could understand completely why they would be so frustrated. Being thrust into an area one was unfamiliar with was awful-Gordon himself would know this.

"Hey, Gordon?" a calm, feminine voice beside him spoke, a hand reaching out to touch his arm, "Are you okay?"

Freeman's gaze fell upon the young woman, a concerned smile visible upon her face. She must have noticed his disgruntled expression as he contemplated the precariousness of the surrounding area.

Gordon nodded his head slightly in response to this inquiry, though he did not reciprocate the positive expression.

It was ever so puzzling how Alyx had the ability to smile in such dire times. Through all of this despair and pessimism, she was the one who was easily able to crack a grin, often even adding a lighthearted remark along with her cheery manner. Oh, how Gordon was itching to ask her, '_How do you do that?_' How does one remain so positive and optimistic when fate throws such heavy burdens at them?

As it was, the physicist's facial expressions scarcely lifted, even in the slightest. Life frowned at him, and his only resort was to return that frown, glaring right back at life. Exhibitions of joy were so incredibly difficult for him; he figured there was no use in feigning these emotions when they weren't sincere. Seldom did a smile even begin to conceptualize among his face.

Yet, there had been times when exceptions could be made for this no-smile rule that he mentally regulated. Alyx herself was the exception, as a matter of fact. Through the times he had spent with the young mechanic, he had grown exceptionally close to her. Her positivity perhaps even reminded himself of what he used to be, someone with a sense of humor and slight pride; someone who saw all of the potential the world had and worked hard to achieve their goals. There was once a time when he himself was a bright-eyed physics student who wanted nothing but to explore the possibilities of instant teleportation. Though different from what he once had, Gordon still saw all of that potential in Alyx. Maybe even once-just once-he had smiled a little for her.

The expression was one of relief; joy, even. There was a high possibility that Alyx hadn't even noticed the smile that crossed his lips, as it must have been minuscule and difficult to notice. With the unbelievably gracious assistance of the Vortigaunts, Alyx's life had been restored. The brutal, merciless acts that a Combine Hunter committed left the woman in a critical condition. On the threshold of death, she was rescued by a group of Vortigaunts who saved her life, in return for Gordon's assistance. The expedition of finding the necessary compounds to save Alyx's life proved a difficult task, however, it had been undoubtably rewarding upon completion. Maybe, just maybe then did he smile sincerely.

"You sure about that? 'Cause you seem kind of out of it. Want to sit down for a while?"

Again, Alyx's voice interrupted Gordon's cerebration. He saw this as a good thing, too, as he tended to overanalyze things very often. A small break might be beneficial, anyways; maybe Alyx would be up for an encouraging chat.

No spoken words were required to indicate an answer from Gordon, he merely gave another nod of his head. He carefully watched Alyx as she motioned towards a nearby small staircase. She sat on one of these steps, resting her arm on one of the higher stairs. Within seconds, Gordon followed, cautiously taking a seat next to his

companion.

"Look, Gordonâ€|" Alyx spoke again, pausing in mid-sentence, "I know you're not too happy about passing through this place again."

Gordon blinked, a look of surprise visible on his face. _How was she able to tell that he was unsettled?_

Seeing the man's expression lead Alyx to smile, a soft chuckle escaping her.

"You've been looking a little pale since we got here." she explained, a sympathetic smile showing up. "To be honest, I'm not too ecstatic about being here, either."

Alyx's statement brought a mood of sobriety with it, her smile soon disheartening.

Freeman couldn't help but silently admit it, yes. He was still _very_ untrusting of the area. After all, this was the location where the two had a near fatal encounter with their first Hunter. Each and every memory associated with this town was, as previously mentioned, negative and bitter.

Gordon watched Alyx as she inhaled sharply before continuing to speak.

"I think our stopping here is the best for our new friends, though. They probably need some time to take everything in, you know?"

Gordon tilted his head to the slightest, through a pause of continuous silence. Vague, incomprehensible quarreling was audible in the distance. The voices of the two siblings could be heard; through their indistinguishable arguments were tones of discontent and exasperation. Pausing their conversation for a moment, the two rebels listened to the voices. Awkward silence passed, Alyx clearing her throat after a few seconds to indicate she was resuming her speech.

"We'll hit the road once Sam and his brother have dealt with their issues." she continued, shaking her head as if attempting to ignore the squabbling,

"In the meantime, what do you say we look for a bite to eat? I don't think that Headcrab from last night was very sufficient."

This didn't sound like too great of an idea to Gordon. He frowned, turning away from Alyx in a fit of stubbornness.

Alyx probably stared at him for a moment, for she too went silent. However, this silence came to a quick end as she stood up from her spot, brushing herself off and turning towards Gordon, who remained in a slump of disapprobation and aversion.

"Don't worry, Gordon. I'm not leaving you. We'll search together, okay?" Vance spoke with another positive grin on her face, arms akimbo. "No screwin' around here. Just looking for food, on the off chance that there is anything around here."

With a reluctant sigh, Freeman stood up as well. Searching for food together would be alright. No sense of danger in doing that, right? The two had backup if they needed it; DÃ~G was sitting only a short distance away from them. Gordon wasn't going to let anything unthinkable happen to Alyx. He had already lost enough loved ones as it was. A thought one could easily dwell on if given the opportunity, reminiscing about those he had lost wasn't going to get anyone anywhere. Everything would work out safely.

Alyx kept a cheerful countenance, replying to Gordon's actions with zeal, "That's the spirit!"

Enthusiastic as always, Alyx.

The two rebels walked from the staircase they had rested themselves on, approaching a nearby shack. Overall, the area was very worn out; there was a noticeable amount of rust covering many of the aged buildings. As they walked, the distant voices of the brothers could still be heard. It sounded as if they had calmed down a bit, which could be considered positive; certainly best to blow off steam before getting back on the metaphorical road.

Upon noticing that Gordon and Alyx had left their spot on the staircase, DÃ~G perked up his head with interest. He lifted himself from the ground, no longer desiring to sit down. Once the mechanical life caught up to the two resistance members, he poked his large head in between them as they walked, making attentive beeping noises.

"Hey, boy." Alyx looked over to DÃ~G, who was trying hard to mimic her walking pace. "You doing alright?"

The large bot let out another noise, a lower-pitched '_boop_' of an exclamation. Gordon saw it rather difficult to understand the living, yet non-living creature. Alyx could interpret the machine's communications without challenge, unlike Freeman.

Alyx stopped at one of these worn-out buildings, motioning to it as she carefully approached the door. "Let's start out here. Maybe we'll find something canned, if we're lucky."

She gave the old door a push, which, in return, spat out dust and made a creaky noise of defiance.

"Hmm." the woman muttered under her breath, staring at the door for a moment before pulling on the doorknob. As a response, the door remained still, refusing to budge even a little.

"Well, that isn't going to work out." Alyx huffed as she backed away from the door, glancing over to DÃ~G. "Mind helping us out here, boy?"

Not giving a verbal response, DÃ~G simply walked over to the door, swiftly punching a hole through it and knocking it flat to the ground. After completing the task, he reared his mechanical head, awaiting feedback from his master.

"Alright!" Alyx nodded her head, seemingly pleased with the job. "Thanks, DÃ~G."

Dust that had accumulated over the ages was stirred as the two set foot into the abandoned shack. Dimly lit was the small structure; the only source of light was that of the outside world. While this did a decent job of illuminating the interior of this building, it was not enough. Simultaneously as Gordon turned on his flashlight, he heard Alyx cough from the dust inside of the building.

"This place is loaded with dust, man. You see anything in here?"

Flashlight shined all over the interior of the shanty. Nope, not a single hint of food or any supplies, for that matter. Evidently, the building had served a purpose during some period of time. However, it had seen enough action in its life, and whatever contents it stowed were long gone by now.

As a response to this question, Gordon shook his head.

"Well," replied Alyx, stepping outside of the shack with another sharp exhale, "no sense in sticking around in there, then. Shall we carry on?"

With a nod of his head, the physicist followed the mechanic's lead. Tagging behind them was DÃ~G, who appeared to be quite content at the moment. One could see this as a good thing, too, as he tended to get awfully nervous when danger approached. For the time being, safety was present

Alyx stopped at another building, which appeared to be considerably sizable, or longer than the previous shack, at least. Long walks were not required to get to this building; it couldn't have been less than twenty feet away from the previous building.

"Let's hope we get a little more luck in this one." the woman spoke as she fiddled with the handle of the entrance door.

DÃ~G watched her with curiosity, however, he soon realized that she wouldn't need any assistance with this task. This door must have been in a better condition than the previous one, as it didn't take long before Alyx swung it open with ease.

Unlike the previous shack, this one possessed something much more comforting: windows. Light seeped from the glass windows; although the windows were quite dusty themselves, daylight could still be seen through them. For this reason, Gordon did not need to put a flashlight to use.

Both rebels stepped in; the aged, wooden floor creaking beneath their tired feet when they walked about. The old wood planks scattered across the creaky floor gave off the feeling that work had been done on the building before it was abandoned. A chill draft spilled out of the open door, DÃ~G peaking his head in to watch with curiosity what the two were doing.

Alyx was the first to discover a row of cabinets in this shack. Around what appeared to be a makeshift kitchen, unfurnished ligneous boxes with hinged doors. Zealously, the female mechanic approached these cabinets, swinging them open without hesitation. It did not take long for her to walk up to Gordon, a dirtied metal object clasped in her hands.

"We scored!" Alyx held the dusty object up to her partner, an over-exaggerated-looking smile soon weakening, "â€|Kind of."

She stared down at the object in her hands: _a single can of beans_. Her expression told Gordon enough. Both of them knew that _one_ can of beans wasn't enough ration to feed four people. Even a standard headcrab would be more filling than those canned beans.

"Well, it'sâ€| Something, right?" she shrugged, still grasping the can, "Maybe we'll find something better if we keep looking."

Gordon raised his eyebrows, making something of a shrugging gesture as well. _Why must food be such a struggle in the post-apocalyptic world?_

When Alyx had finished checking the other cabinets to no avail, the pair decided to part from the house. With their newly obtained beans, they would be unstoppable!

â€|That was also an exaggeration, unfortunately.

A sort of unexpected meeting with one of the brothers took place.

"Hey, Bean-" Alyx cut short her speech.

Dean now had an entirely confused expression on his face.

"â€|_D-Dean_! Of course. Your name is Dean." she shook her head, embarrassed of her words.

The shorter of the brothers stared at Alyx for a few long, uncomfortable seconds.

"Yeah, wasn't the whole _name thing_ addressed before?" Dean replied, looking awfully perplexed, "Anyways, what's the word? How long are we stayin' in this place?"

Alyx glanced over to the canned beans, "Oh, we were just looking for some food and supplies, what have you."

She held up the aluminum plunder for Dean to see.

The man simply stared at it for a few seconds before directing his gaze to his leg. The leg of his jeans was still dampened by the gruesome bodily fluids of a deceased antlion.

"Right, rightâ€| 'Cause, I kind of need to get this cleaned off soon. _Really soon_."

For a few moments, Alyx paused as if she was contemplating something. Afterwards, she responded to Dean's question.

"Well, seeing as I'm not too fond of this town _at all_, I have no objections about getting out of here. We were just waiting for you and your brother to gather your bearings. You two doing okay?"

"Yep," Dean responded without hesitation, "A-okay. Sam just wanted some time alone to think aboutâ€¦| _Whatever Sams think about_. Did you want me to go get him?"

"Whenever you're ready to hit the road. The sooner we can get back to White Forest, the better."

"I'll be back in a minute, then." Dean held out his hand in a sort of 'stay right here' gesture as he temporarily departed to seek his brother.

Upon being left with each other once again, Alyx directed her attention to Gordon. She did not appear to be very happy about the situation. It was evident that she was rather tired, worry also noticeable in her eyes.

"You know where to go, right, Gordon?" she glanced around the area surrounding them.

Gordon responded with a frank nod of his head, the only communication that he had ever really gotten used to.

"Good, 'cause I'm flying blind here."

It came to Gordon's attention that Alyx had never really gotten much of a chance to explore the small cluster of shacks and old buildings. The first time they had passed through the town was rather unsuccessful and _unsettling_, to say the least. After that very first Hunter had ambushed them, Alyx was left practically, dare sayâ€¦| Dead. A mere thought like this was one of the main reasons why Gordon wasn't exactly_ happy_ about visiting the whole area again.

Their second time traveling through the forest-the time they had departed to search for survivors in the ruins of the city-they had not traveled through the town area. As a matter of fact, they avoided it completely; had they not been traveling with two confused, tired strangers, they very likely would have avoided it a second time.

Gordon's steam of negative thoughts were interrupted by the new friends' return. Alyx, who had also appeared to be contemplating something herself, put a cheerful smile on her face.

The taller brother was the first to greet the two rebels.

"Hey." Sam's tone was quiet, his posture appearing to be considerably tense. "We're, uhâ€¦| We're going now?"

"Welcome back." responded Alyx, "I believe we are! Gordon will lead us the way."

Consequently, the second journey to White Forest pressed on. While it was true to say that Gordon was glad to part ways with the village of abandoned industrial shacks, he didn't necessarily look forward to traveling through Victory Mine once more. Perhaps there was a different, safer route that could be taken. The Vortigaunt that assisted him through the area not long ago had found a different way, maybe he could do so as well.

With high hopes of not meeting a terrible fate, Gordon searched for a better route to Victory Mine.

10. Subsidence

"Have I ever mentioned how much this place sucks? 'Cause it really does _suck_."

Sam snickered at the complaints of his nearby brother, who hadn't at all grown used to the alienated surroundings. This snickering wasn't exactly caused by any humor present in the mood, rather a sort of wordless 'I told you so' retort.

Dean was never late to voice his '_opinions_' such as these. He was always calm and collected whenever he forced Sam into his own situations, but when he himself got thrust into something completely new? _Complaints._ Complaints here, complaints there, complaints _everywhere_. Yet, he had the audacity to call _Sam_, of all people, the whiny bitch of the group. Hah.

"Well, Dean? What are you going to do about it?" Sam inquired as a response, stepping through the puddles of murky water below.

It did not take long for the group to traverse deep into the underground caverns, which, according to Alyx, were the only way through to White Forest. Apparently, these abandoned mines had become the perfect breeding grounds for a family of large insects known as _antlions_.

Antlions These creatures were quite atrocious, as most of the wildlife in the new surroundings. Large, winged, wasp-like organisms that functioned exactly like Earthly insects, save for their _incredibly large size_. The beasts had to be at _least_ a foot or two tall; when combining these features with their ability to fly and their rigid fangs, well It was all matter of repulsive.

Still, these sizable insects were no real difficulty. Compared to demons, ghosts, shifters, and the friggin' _Horsemen of the Apocalypse_, Antlions were incredibly easy to kill. A couple of hits with the submachine gun Sam had received, and the creatures were down.

As the brothers and their newly acquainted companions made their way through the cavernous, dimly lit area, they continuously shot down the ant-like creatures. Antlions would crawl up to them, scrambling up with their four-legged bodies, letting out loud, raspy hisses-only to meet their tragic end seconds later. Even Sam would admit that this made a nice exercise to let out remaining anger and pent up frustration.

These caverns, which Alyx referred to as _Victory Mine_, were incredibly claustrophobic and tortuous. A faint blue color shined against the polished, rocky walls. Water was abundant-which was no real surprise, seeing as it was all deep underground-and there was a notable putrid humidity present in the air. Scattered about were the juvenile forms of the antlions, the remaining live ones sticking themselves to the gooey walls and making high squeaking noises whenever approached. Alyx informed them upon first entering that the larval antlions were quite harmless, as long as one didn't purposely

stick their fingers inside of a larva's mouth. That, as she stated with her own words, would _'just plain hurt'_.

During their descent into the caves, the woman had explained how Gordon and her knew of the area so well, and how her spectacled companion had to travel through these very areas to save her life. The _larval extracts of antlions_, as the female rebel worded them, apparently had otherworldly properties that could work miracles, such as bringing back the recently deceased.

While that was all very nice, Sam couldn't help but feel a _little_ claustrophobic. The winding tunnels to travel through, combined with Dean's _complaints_ and the overall stench in the air was getting uncomfortably close to _unbearable_.

Unlike his older brother, however, Sam chose not to complain. After all, this was a post-apocalyptic setting, and the brothers had already fortunately stumbled upon some allies to escort them to safety. The younger brother had to admit, if those two strangers and their robotic dog hadn't helped him out, he might not have made it out alive. Those zombies he had encountered were damn _tough_, too, probably even stronger than the Croatoan infected the brothers dealt with years ago.

Lead by the man known as Gordon, the group continued to battle through zombies. Everyone played their part, using guns and the occasional crowbar to take the enemies out. The only exception was DãG, who was not able to properly fit into the elevator shaft. When the mechanical canine discovered this, it appeared to have something of a simulated fit of disappointment. With Alyx's reassuring, the hefty android was coaxed into finding a way around the cave-to meet up with the group on the other side of the aboveground surface.

All of this was sailing quite steadily until an interruption. Shrill hissing was audible, much like the sound of the other antlions. While this was no surprise for Sam nor his brother, something must have been pretty urgent, as Alyx quickly grabbed the taller of the Winchesters and yanked him away from the scene.

"Look out, Sam!" she had called moments before taking hold of him. She was incredibly strong, and did an exceptional job at _harshly_ pushing him away_.

"Christ! _What was __**that**__ for_" Sam exclaimed, though his exasperated question was soon cut off by the vision of a bright liquid rushing towards his previous location. It splashed into the ground where he once stood, sizzling and crackling as it ate through the rocky ground below.

"It's _acid_." Alyx narrowed her eyes at the corrosive liquid. The vibrant, neon green substance continued to dance and flicker for a few more moments until mixing with the nearby water and diluting.

Sam winced at this.

"Sorry for the scare." the woman replied, an embarrassed expression present on her face, "That stuff's even dangerous to Gordon and his suit. I can't imagine how it'd feel without armor."

Wide-eyed, Dean watched as Sam regained his composure. The older brother stepped forth, placing a protective hand on his younger sibling's shoulder.

"You okay, Sammy?" Dean appeared to be more shocked than Sam even was.

"Uhâ€¦" the taller brother muttered under his breath, then proceeding to nod his head, "Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine."

"The hell did that come from?" Dean turned his head in the direction of where the acidic solution had originated.

Alyx frowned, shining her flashlight in the very direction Dean stared.

"Antlion workers. We sure are in luck today, aren't we?" the girl groaned.

Of course, that very statement could easily be assumed sarcastic.

"Great," Dean replied before Sam received a chance to, "How do we gank these things?"

"Aim for their heads. Be careful, they explode upon death. You're going to want to stand a good distance away from them."

Dean let out a sigh as a response to this command, "Awesome."

Ah, same old Dean. Still saying 'awesome' all of the time.

Sam kept a tight grip on his own weapon, ready to attack whenever necessary. He made it a high priority of his to stay alert. After all, he hadn't the slightest idea what would happen if he died in this place. Seeing as a night had already passed, it was easy to assume that none of this was a dream. Of course.

Considerably loud was the pattering of antlion feet. Multiple ones, though invisible, still ever present by the sound of their legs scrambling about. From a higher, humanly inaccessible point in the cave, out crawled another one of the pesky arthropods. Unlike the previously encountered specimens, however, this one considerably differentiated from the norm. Its wings were small, translucent and slightly iridescent. Also to be mentioned was the beast's head, scaled much larger than the rest of its body.

Its appearance was not incredibly important at that point, anyhow. What mattered was that more acid came tumbling from the organism's maw-the same exact liquid that had almost hit the younger brother moments ago.

Sam's older brother was the first to retaliate against this monstrous insect. His shotgun aimed right at the creature, shooting it directly in the head. The impact caused it to combust almost immediately, leaving splashes of acid all around its scattered remains.

After completing his job of shooting the vile entity, Dean made an expression of disgust. Fortunately, the expulsion of corrosive compound did not directly hit any of the survivors; it merely etched

the ground, leaving textured markings of chemical decay.

"Don't tell me we're going to have to deal with these things the whole time." Dean remarked as he gawked at the insect cadaver.

Alyx hesitantly let out a chuckle, though this sounded more nervous than cheerful, "They do live around here, unfortunately. Once we're out of the mines, we shouldn't have to deal with any more workers."

"And by _shouldn't_, you meanâ€|?" the shorter, older sibling narrowed his eyes.

"Can't guarantee anything, dude." Alyx merely frowned, "There isn't much room to complain-this _is_ all borderline apocalyptic, you know."

Dean shook his head in dismay before responding, "Right, right."

With a glance at both Alyx and her companion, one could easily tell that they'd been through a lot. Chances were, they were grief-stricken. Sam could easily relate to this, of course. Oh, how he hoped the apocalypse wouldn't result in him and Dean's homeland.

Speaking of which, what was going on back at home? Sam couldn't help but wonder this-was time still going by without the _Winchesters_ there? Did Castiel find himself lost without the hunting duo? Did he look for them, or did the angel merely shrug it off and look for someone else to save the world?

The latter of those thoughts brought a subconscious grimace to Sam's face; he didn't want to believe that anything terrible would happen. If he was going to die, he'd die saving the world from Lucifer. No replacements were needed.

â€|Of course, the younger brother was forced to shake off these feelings of stress when the current situation called for his attention.

More audible hissing and the pitter-pattering of insect-like feet. _More Antlions_. Lovely.

Dean stepped forth, shotgun close by and prepared to take action. Seemed like he was getting the hang of things pretty quickly. Though both brothers had never been in a situation like this, it was completely safe to say they caught on fast.

If anything, it was even _easier_ to take down a bunch of insects than it was to do so with demons. At least these things, though repulsive, didn't require anything special like holy water. Now, that was a real _pain in the ass_.

Armed and ready to fend for themselves, the group pressed on with their travels through the dimly lit cave pathways. Gunshot by gunshot, the crude insects were slain in their place, dropping to the ground without the slightest indication of gracefulness.

Aside from the ever-frequent shooting things and avoiding of acidic

solutions, everything was working out quite fine. This was almost like another day on the job; not getting sufficient rest, not eating quite enough, being incredibly stressed out everything surrounding, plenty of horrifyingly detailed contemplationsâ€¦ All just another day in the life of Sam Winchester. Just add some _aliens and monsters attacking the place_, and it was all complete.

Conversation wasn't as open during these times, as the main focus was to survive the whole ordeal.

Everything sure was going along _great_, save for the few interruptions and avoiding sudden death.

â€¦Or, at least, so Sam _thought_ until the bittersweet peacefulness was interrupted with a blistering roar, followed by a series of light tremors in the ground.

Now, it was Alyx's turn to become infuriated and/or frustrated, as she was quick to shoot a glare in the direction of the roar, then a confused glance at Gordon.

"_Goddamn it_."

Dean looked at the woman with confusion and exasperation, "Goddamn _what?_"

The woman gave another nervous glance in the direction the rebels were heading, then proceeding to look back at Sam and his brother. The expression in her eyes told it all-she was frightened.

The strange-suited companion of Alyx took hold of her hand; though he was still apparently too shy to say anything, his facial expression was equally nervous.

Though appearing to be fearful, Alyx spoke again, in a slightly more stern voice, "We need to haul ass."

Without a chance for the Winchester siblings to question exactly _what they were running from_, the group sped up the pace. Cautious walking turned into something of a jog, which then transitioned into fleeing after mere seconds.

The female's raspy, exhausted voice called out as they ran.

"There's an antlion guard gaining on us! It must've heard our gunshots!"

"So," Sam replied through deep breaths as he sprinted, "What do we do, i-is there any way to gank it?"

"What does _gank_ even-" Alyx stopped herself, rewording her sentence, "-_Yeah_, I don't think so. We're already running low on ammo, there won't be enough time to kill the damn thing!"

Sam took a hasty glance behind him, an action that he regretted not long after.

An incredibly large behemoth of an insect was gaining on them, galloping and ready to charge like a bull. The thing was damn _huge_, about the size of Alyx's robotic accomplice, if not more mountainous.

Fierce, grumbling growls were let out of the so-called _guard_, sounds which could only be interpreted as aggression and hostility.

The worst part? _It was drawing ever closer._

"And you're _sure_ that we can outrun this thing?" Dean demanded, still appearing eager to shoot the monstrous carapace.

"Hell if I know!" Alyx replied, likely too focused on running to consider such a possibility.

Then-what were the odds?-the group ran into what was least desired.

A dead end.

**Dead. **

**Freaking. **

**End.**

The alleged _guard_ of the antlions approached, bucking its strangely-formed, hoof-like feet. It was ready to charge at any given opportunity.

In fact, the beast _did_ charge. Straight at everyone, actually, galloping at an _alarmingly fast pace_.

Not a single moment of time was free for speech or communication. Wasn't it ironic how the quietest member of the group knew exactly what to do?

Gordon, with a strange orange gun-type weapon in hand, lifted a nearby boulder and chucked said object at the monstrous insect's head, making it come to a brief halt as it regained its composure.

Silently yet swiftly, the spectacled man ushered the other three to a nearby hole in the wall-a tunnel of sorts that had _just_ enough space to crawl through.

If that wasn't the epitome of claustrophobic, then who _knew_ what it was.

The miniature tunnel was filled with antlion larvae, which squirmed about, blindly unaware of the human life passing through.

Outside of this mini-tunnel was the antlion guard, who frustratedly struggled to get into the tunnel. Evidently, the tunnel was far too small for it to enter, though it continued to charge at the wall, bashing its sturdy head against the outside of the tunnel.

Now sprawled onto the ground, everyone took a moment to catch breath.

"Anyone hurt?" Sam panted, a throbbing pain now noticeable in his head.

Dean let out a groan, though one couldn't be sure if it was of frustration, aching, or a combination of both.

"Just _a-okay_," Alyx sighed, giving Gordon pat on the shoulder. "Assuming there's a way we can hold the thing off, it might be wise to look for an exist."

"The hell are we down here for, anyway?" Dean's palm collided with his forehead, "If your _dog-thing_ _could_ find another way around, why can't we?"

"He's an eight-foot tall robot that can scale mountains if he had to." Alyx raised an eyebrow

Dean fell silent afterward.

The woman scrambled to her feet into somewhat of a crouching position, quietly motioning towards a small pathway that the tunnel lead into.

Not a moment's hesitation was required for everyone to follow, in spite of being fatigued. Nothing wrong with a little exercise, right? When one was to run for their life, complaining wasn't necessary _at all_—there was very little time to do so, anyhow.

"Any luck?" Sam inquired, leaning towards the other two to get a glimpse at their progress. Both members of the _resistance_, as they called it, were working around a way through the cramped quarters.

Gordon shook his head, and Alyx replied with a, _"Nope."_

Sam let out a sigh as his eyes trailed over to his older brother, who appeared to be incredibly exasperated and exhausted.

"This _sucks_, man. Not even twenty four hours into this crap and we're going to _die_."

Sam frowned at Dean's pessimistic comment. "You don't know that, Dean. I mean, hell—we're still alive right now, right?"

Dean let out another noise of frustration as he pushed himself up against the tunnel walls, making a bitter face. "I bet this is Cas' fault. He probably doesn't even know we're gone."

Sam exhaled, giving a shrug of his shoulders. Truth be told, even _he_ didn't know that. The younger brother barely knew _anything_ about Castiel, though—Dean was always the one the angel came flying to in times of desperation.

"Maybe," the taller individual replied, "or maybe he can't reach us here. He could be looking for us. It's possible that time isn't even going by without us there."

"_Psh_," Dean scoffed, "like our being gone would be such a big deal. Michael and Lucifer will find other vessels and screw up the whole place before we even have a chance to get back. Just wait and see."

"Again," Sam furrowed his brows, "You still don't know that's going

to happen."

Their deep conversation was interrupted by the voice of Alyx.

"Okay, guys. We found a way through."

"_Great._" Dean sardonically replied before Sam received a chance to respond. "C'mon, Sammy."

Sam gave a roll of his eyes as they escaped the narrow path, which ultimately lead into a larger portion of the cave.

For another long while, the rest of the group's walking went about with ease, save for the exhaustion of running. That exhaustion, of course, was just a temporary problem, but it did in fact slow the group down a bit.

A good ten or fifteen minutes passed without much complication; only the pesky smaller Antlions bothered to approach the group, as well as a few workers. This time, less guns were fired in fear of stirring everything once again. Pissing off the ginormous guards that resided in these caves wouldn't do any good.

Once the group had managed to stumble upon an elevator, Alyx let out a great sigh of relief, "This is it-this is the way up, is everyone ready?"

Sam gave a nod of his head, while Dean replied with a, "Yep."

Thus, the wonderful ascent to the highest point of the cave began. Another elevator ride which would _hopefully_ lead the group back to the surface area.

"That was close," Alyx ran a hand through her tied-back hair, letting a sigh of relief escape her. "Thanks for the help there, Gordon."

Gordon merely gave an awkward-looking wince. _Why was it that the dude always looked uncomfortable and perturbed?_

Well, anyhowâ€¦ What mattered at the moment was that everyone-especially Dean-was safe and ready to get back to the surface. Maybe they'd even have time for a lunch break. That'd be great, even if the older brother would complain about the lack of _unhealthy food_ and _pie_.

Upon reaching the elevator's destination, Sam and the group eagerly stepped out.

â€¦_Oh_. What a surprise.

"_**More **_caves?" Dean questioned impatiently, looking more pissed off than ever.

"Not exactly." Alyx grinned, looking much less frightened than she'd been before.

Dean merely stared at her, expression confused.

The woman motioned to her right, pointing an extended finger towards

an area that appeared to be seemingly brighter than the rest of the cave, "Exit's just around the corner."

A grin fell upon Sam's face, looking over to his brother without needing to say a word. If anyone in the area couldn't already tell, Sam was_ damn relieved_ to get out of the suffocatingly dull caves.

Oh, how wonderful the fresh air would feel in comparison to the awful, rotten air of the caves. Even though their current situation was already somewhat terrible, at least it was about to become _slightly less terrible_, which was always a plus.

Alas, everything was great until yet another tremble in the rocky ground below.

The sound of ferocious roaring was audible, and the rumbling grew catastrophically as rocks began to tumblr from the ceilings, stalactites crumbling to tiny pieces. Noise grew and grew until it was almost deafening, with Sam and the others fleeing to the exit of the cave.

What an incredibly close call it was, as the team fortunately managed to escape the caves with their lives completely intact.

Another close call.

Sam let out another sigh, turning his glance to where Dean was standing next to him, "You alright, Dean?"

â€|

â€|

â€|

No response.

Dean was nowhere to be seen.

Sam frantically spun around, looking for the sight of his brother.

No Dean in sight, only Alyx and Gordon's stunned expressions as they came to the same realization that Sam didn't want to admit.

Dean hadn't escaped the cave-in. There was only rocks and boulders.

...Then, nothing.

**"Dean!"**

11. Pursuit

****AUTHOR'S NOTE:** Welp, it looks like it's been a year since the publishing of Hunters and Rebels' first chapter! Happy birthday, little fanfiction. Happy birthday. In celebration, I've gripped this fic tight, and raised it from hiatus.**

****Without further ado, ****_Chapter 11 of Hunters and Rebels_****.****

* * *

><p>There was something about this Castiel fellow that struck Barney as odd. Well, to be fair, there was a lot that struck him as odd. After all of the years he'd lived, and all of the battles he'd fought, he couldn't once recall meeting someone who claimed to be an angel.

- Not until now, that is.

He was religious before it all happened. He had a faith, and he prayed to a God. Days after the Black Mesa incident hit, he still prayed, even when Lauren didn't show up. That loss hit him hard, and for a while, his mind was filled with the thickest fog of denial. Losing a loved one was such a shock, and for the longest time, he'd pray that she was safe, and prayed that the Combine would get the hell off of the planet.

Neither of these prayers had been answered.

This was the reason why Barney didn't believe in God, even in spite of his religious familial upbringing. This was the reason why he was so incredibly reluctant to believe that someone was an angel, of all beings.

Still, unbelievable or not, it was important to check in on the rebels and refugees housed in White Forest, and Castiel just so happened to be one of them.

A couple of knocks on the door of the angel's room was all it took for a response,

"Yes?"

"It's me - Barney. Haven't heard anything from ya' in a while. Everything okay in there?"

Castiel opened the door, only moments after Barney's question. His face was grave, his light blue eyes giving off a cold, yet determined look.

"I'm fine. Have you gotten any word from Dean?"

Barney gave a nervous chuckle, "Sorry man, nothing but radio static."

The azure-eyed man didn't hesitate when responding, "I'm going to look for him."

"Like that?" Calhoun's voice was uncertain as he motioned toward the injury on Castiel's chest, "Are you sure about that? That Headhumper got you pretty good. I don't think it's safe for you to go out there-"

His speech was interrupted by Castiel, who seemed determined as ever, "That isn't of import. My mission is clear: I have to find Dean

Winchester before it's too late. It's already bad enough that I'm unfamiliar with this terrain."

Barney sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose in a bout of frustration. He couldn't just let some headcrab-clawed guy run out into the wilderness. Who knew what kind of dangers lied beyond familiar territory? The Combine's superportal may have been destroyed, but there was no telling how many _stray Hunters_ or _vengeful Advisors_ were on the prowl. Letting someone go out on their own without any knowledge of these hazards was plain inhumane.

When the ex-security guard had come to a decision, he held his hands out, making an offer,

"Look, if you're going to run out there in search of your buddy, at least let me tag along. I'm not going to let you become _Headcrab kibble_."

Castiel seemed rather frustrated, himself, though his stance was completely still and lacking of any kind of _humanly sensible discomfort_. The man fell silent for a moment, though he soon came to an agreement,

"So be it. Let's go."

"Woah, woah, woah," Barney stopped Castiel, the moment he began to waltz by him, approaching the direction of the building's exit, "You're barely wearing anything - let's get you suited up before we run out of here."

Barney motioned toward the storage room, leading him toward the room before anything else. It was a small room - at least, in comparison to any kind of storage house he'd been in, though it held a decent amount of supplies, ranging from scavenged Combine bulletproof vests to ammunition boxes of all sizes. The first thing he handed to Castiel was one of these vests.

"Protection is vital around these parts. Even with the Combine tucking its tail between its legs, there's still plenty of danger to go around."

"I already have protection," Castiel protested, though he accepted the vest, anyhow, "I have an angel blade. Does that not compensate?"

Barney sneered, "I'm not sure how big the thing is, but it probably won't _compensate_ for a pissed off rogue Overwatch soldier."

The blue-eyed man nodded, as if understanding what Barney had said, and he applied the bullet-proof vest, though his response contradicted Calhoun's assumption, "I don't know what that is."

"You'll find out soon enough. How good are you with a gun?"

"Well, it seems that firearms have proven to be more useful than I suspected," the trenchcoat-wearing man replied thoughtfully, "Yes, I'd say I'm very _good with a gun._"

"Perfect. You're going to need one, then," Barney dug around in the stored supplies, unveiling an AR2 Pulse rifle, "Normally, I'd give you something less bulky, though I get the feeling you're going to need more firepower than that. 'Think you can handle?'"

"I can handle," Castiel accepted the gun when it was handed to him. In spite of his previously displayed confusion, he seemed to grasp the concept of wielding a gun, even one that was of high power.

Once all necessary preparations were made, the two set out toward the exit of the base. One of the rebels in charge of guarding the heavy-duty doors noticed this, and was quick to motion toward the duo,

"Going anywhere, Calhoun?"

"Yeah," Calhoun responded, "The man I met, Castiel, wants to go looking for his friend. I'm going to give the guy a hand; I won't be gone for too long."

"Sure thing, mister Calhoun. Do you want any help?"

"We do not require help," Castiel appeared persistent on just the two of them going.

"Well, alright," the rebel replied, "I'll raise the door. You two be safe out there - it's bad enough that we haven't gotten word from Freeman and Vance."

The mention of those two names made him a bit concerned. Come to think of it, they had been gone for a while without saying a thing. One would think they'd have the courtesy to call over radio. A lot of terrible things could've happened to them, andâ€¦|

No, now was not the time for worrying about that shit. The last thing he needed was to get all upset in the midst of danger.

The two passed through another gate, exchanging information with the other rebels who guarded the exterior of White Forest. Similar responses were given, and similar questions were asked, though, in the end, the only ones departing the base were Barney and Castiel, just as they'd entered not long ago.

The air outside was fresh, crisp and filled with the chirp of birds. Ironically, birds were one of the very few remaining creatures that didn't perish with the Combine's takeover. They'd obviously found something to eat, even with all of the pollution floating around Earth's crust.

Birds weren't the topic of importance, however, so Barney started off with the basics,

"So, no idea what the Combine is, huh?"

"I know the definition of combine, though I assume that's not what you're referring to," Castiel lifted an eyebrow.

"No, man. I'm talking about the Combine. As in, big, scary alien overlords_?"

Castiel seemed perplexed, as his eyebrows were knit together in a rather confused fashion, "I haven't heard of them before. Where does thisâ€¦ _Combine_ reside?"

"All over the goddamn place, as far as I'm concerned," Barney aimed at a nearby headcrab as they walked, no hesitation to execute it when it drew closer. It only took one shot to clear it out of the way, "They grabbed Earth by its _short_ and _curlies_ about twenty years ago, and haven't given up since."

The Combine takeover was an incredibly touchy subject for Barney. Honestly, he could've given a longer, more detailed description on how terrible the Combine was, and all of the horrible things it had done to millions - no, _billions_ of people, butâ€¦ _Again_, now really wasn't the time for getting upset about those things. Best to keep eyes on the road ahead, and distract oneself from the dangers ahead.

"I see," Castiel's eyes appeared to be wandering about the area; he seemed more focused on the surroundings than on the explanation Calhoun had provided to him.

Man, what a weird guy.

It took a few moments for the other to say something more, "So, these Combine - are they going to pose a threat to us?"

Barney shrugged his shoulders, "I can't say, for sure. A good buddy of mine - Gordon - he actually started up a rebellion against the bastards. There used to be a big portal up in that sky," he pointed to the sky above, "but it got destroyed when Gordon and our colleagues launched a rocket toward it. Nobody's heard much from the Combine since, though I reckon they'll be _pissed_, if they ain't already dead."

"They're humans?" Castiel tilted his head ever so slightly to the side,

"Not exactly. There's transhumance forces on their side, but they're run by _alien freaks_. I worked undercover for them before the rebellion started; saw some _nasty_ stuff in that business."

"Would that be one of theirs?"

The trench coat-wearing one directed a finger to an entity in the distance; it was insect-like, four legs scampering about accompanied by a buzzing of wings. The creature was about the size of a wolf, though it bore no canine resemblance.

An antlion? Out _this_ far?

"Nope," Barney aimed his rifle at the creature, shooting it down before it could get any closer, "Just an antlion. Strange, they usually aren't this close to base; we haven't been out here for too long."

Ugh, those were the last kind of pests the inhabitants of White Forest would want to deal with. He'd have to take care of those things after their little hike.

"Don't be afraid to shoot any headhumpers or antlions that crawl your way," Calhoun continued, "They're far from extinction. You'd be doing the world a favor."

Castiel's gaze upon him was one of confusion, "I'm not afraid."

"Good."

Pine trees of towering heights surrounded them as they surveyed the forest. Barney didn't want to venture too far away from the base; there was no telling if Castiel even had a clue where his friend was.

"Any idea where he would be?" the resistance co-leader suggested, "You think he'd be holed up in one of the old mining towns, or what?"

"If Dean is anywhere nearby, the signs of his presence should be prominent. Danger seems to follow in his wake."

"Geez, I know someone who's a lot like that."

Oh, too familiar. Even if the guy was his best friend, Gordon was a bit of a handful sometimes. There wasn't a single place he walked through that didn't get stirred up.

"-There's another man, too," Castiel added, "He goes by the name of Sam Winchester; he is Dean's brother and is also of vital importance. He may be close to Dean. The two are inseparable, for the most part."

"Got it."

The conversation shifted back toward the Combine with Castiel's second mention of it, "Whats the approximate size of a nonhuman Combine affiliate?"

Barney hadn't been looking ahead of him. Instead, his eyes scanned the forestry for signs of any human life, or even any signs of chaotic happenings. None of these were found, though a distant thumping could be heard.

Thump, thump, thump

"Depends, really. Why do you ask?" he turned toward Castiel.

"Is that one of them?"

Running around trees, a gorilla-like formation could be seen bounding toward the two. It emitted electric whirrs and beeping tones, the ground pounding underneath its gargantuan body. Castiel was aiming toward it when Barney grabbed the man's arm, forcibly lowering his rifle.

"Dã~G!"

Perhaps Barney wasn't much of an animal person, but there was one animal-like individual that he greatly honored. He was Alyx's childhood best friend, and though he was comprised of mechanical

parts, his enthusiasm and life-like artificial intelligence surpassed all of the other Black Mesa-engineered bots. DÃ~G was widely appreciated by the current day's resistance, and many of the rebels gladly welcomed his presence.

Castiel's confusion seemed to intensify at the sight of the mechanical canine,

"â€|What is that?"

"That's DÃ~G," Barney ran up to the robot, grinning at it, "Where are Gordon and Alyx?"

DÃ~G looked frantic. It pounded on the dusty ground with its massive hands, rearing its head to the land behind it.

Were they in trouble?

"Oh, hell," Barney quickly examined his AR2, confirming its readiness, eyes darting toward the direction of Castiel, "I think something's wrong - we might have to put that search on hold for a while!"

"I'm going to follow."

Castiel seemed persistent enough, and Calhoun honestly didn't have time to argue with the guy, "Alright, but you better get ready to open fire!"

DÃ~G lead the way, running toward the directionite'd come from, with the two men following. The world around Barney became a blur as he ran, foliage and wildlife alike passing by. Castiel managed well enough; he took out any headcrabs and lone antlions that were in their way, and he was quick to catch up in spite of his injuries.

While DÃ~G couldn't speak, it certainly had its own legible communication system. The displayed language was enough to indicate that something had gone seriously wrong, especially after Barney had asked about his two dear friends. Perhaps the artificial dog was emotive, and often excitable, but it was quite easy to tell when something went wrong.

This must have been one of those moments.

The way DÃ~G lead must have been a newly discovered route, as the paths Barney and Castiel turned on were hardly familiar. It was known among the resistance that there were various ways to enter and leave the White Forest base - this path definitely wasn't the one that Barney entered through. It was incredibly unfamiliar, though by some little feeling in the back of his head, he trusted the robot's judgement.

After minutes of non-stop running, the ex-security guard halted to catch his breath. What seemed incredibly strange to him was that his new partner showed no signs of exhaustion, though Barney chose to focus on that peculiarity later, "Hold on, DÃ~G! I'm only human, I can't just run forever!"

The robot stopped in its tracks, turning to face him. A couple of

behemoth arms outstretched, lifting Barney (and his gun) from the ground. He let out a yelp, though that didn't seem to bother DÃ~G one bit. In spite of his struggling, the bot only ran quicker.

Castiel had no trouble keeping up, which just made everything moreâ€|_weird_. What the hell was up with him? _Maybe that claim he was an angel wasn't so false after all-__

â€|_Nah.__

Either way, with the help of DÃ~G and the struggling of Barney, the two managed to find what they were looking for - an answer that required no words, but rather, a sight that was filled with dissonance. The rocky cave entrance and the worried faces spoke for themselves.

End
file.